

Alcoholics Anonymous: From Spiritual Void to Spiritual Awakening

by

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Abstract

Examining the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) reveals that it grew out of a Christian fundamentalist group known as the Oxford Group. This history connects AA to the writings of St Paul and St Augustine. Their writings look into the lives of every human being, into the struggle of the divided will, into obsession, and made them particularly well suited to the study of addiction. There was no castigation, simply an acceptance and understanding as to the scope and needs of those who struggle with the chains of boundless appetite. The program of AA presents the twelve steps as the process one is required to undergo in order to return to health. The gift of a spiritual awakening is the promise in having worked these steps. This distinguishes AA from other recovery programs. This thesis traces spiritual awakening through the program of AA utilizing literature from the early Christian church to demonstrate how those works were integral in the original program of AA.

Keywords:

Alcoholics Anonymous, St Paul, St Augustine, Oxford Group, Twelve Steps, spiritual awakening, spiritual principles, conversion, concupiscence, divided will, flesh versus spirit, Viktor Frankl, Carl Jung, William James.

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Alcoholics Anonymous: From Spiritual Void to Spiritual Awakening

Introduction

The disease of alcoholism is prevalent in modern society (AMA)¹. Its causes differ from individual to individual. There are, however, a number of consistent approaches to recovery from alcoholism. The program with the longest history and the most success is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). It is a program predicated on the belief of one's powerlessness over alcoholism, a belief in a power greater than one's self, and a belief that a spiritual awakening to that greater power is a gift arising out of a successfully implemented program. I will show that the element of spiritual awakening is a defining characteristic of AA and that this element developed, in part, due to AA's historical Christian roots, specifically the works of St. Paul and St. Augustine and their understanding of the Flesh versus the Spirit dichotomy, and the divided will.

AA was founded in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, where the chance encounter between two alcoholics, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, created what is known today as a worldwide mutual aid group run by and for alcoholics. The program very quickly developed from an exclusively coffee and talk support format to one that included what are known as the “Twelve Steps,” a program comprised of twelve procedural steps, that when followed, would lead to recovery from alcoholism. At the conclusion of these

¹ The disease theory of alcoholism declares that over consumption of alcohol is sometimes caused by a disease of the brain. The American Medical Association declared alcoholism to be an illness in 1956, and in 1991 further expanded the definition in the International Classification of Diseases to be included under both psychiatric and medical sections. American Medical Association. <http://www.ama-assn.org>

Twelve Steps the individual was told that they would have a changed life, in part due to a spiritual awakening that was a result of having completed the Twelve Steps. The core elements of these steps are that the individual must recognize her own powerlessness over her addiction; the individual must turn one's life over to the care of God as one understands God; the individual must make a moral inventory and a personal confession; the individual must make amends for harm caused while in the state of addiction (AA *Pass* 128).

Initially AA grew out of a Christian fundamentalist group known as the Oxford Group. The recognition of God as a central pillar of the program of AA came both from this early connection, and with the powerful spiritual experience which one of the founding members of AA, Wilson, had undergone. In his alcoholic desperation Wilson had cried out to God for assistance, and he found himself redeemed, never to drink again. He insisted that one of the foundational blocks of the newly created program of AA must be redemption.

However, Wilson also recognized that many alcoholics had no use whatsoever for the God of organized religion. In an attempt to appeal to a language that the “everyman” would find acceptable, the language of AA was adapted to move away from the particular Christian lexicon that was a part of its origins and become more inclusive and less intimidating for its new members. The message remained the same, however. A God *of one's own understanding* must become a part of an individual's personal program.

As program materials began to be developed for AA, a broad base of knowledge was incorporated. This base came from the personal experiences of the founders, but also from correspondence with scholars and materials received from the Oxford Group. These Oxford materials rooted AA in the works of the founding Christian thinkers St. Paul and St. Augustine, as well as in the works of renowned modern scholars of the day such as Carl Jung and William James.

The understanding of St. Paul and St. Augustine into the life of every human being, into the struggle of the divided will, into obsession, and into the desire to do good while also desiring to do evil, made their writing particularly well suited to the understanding of addiction. There was no castigation, simply an acceptance and broad understanding of the scope of human nature and the needs of those who struggle with the chains of boundless appetite.

The discussion of concupiscence, distorted passion, passion run wild, is particularly apt in the context of AA. Addiction is distorted passion. Augustine explored this theme with regard to sexual passion and lust. However, distorted passion is behind all addictions including alcoholism, and at its very centre forces us to look at its variety as expressed in rage, lust, gluttony, etc.

One element of the AA program that distinguishes it from other recovery programs is the promise of a spiritual awakening upon completion of the Twelve Step Program. The spiritual transformation portion of this program is perhaps the most significant feature of AA. This is the element that truly changes lives, that enables individuals to leave the past behind and embrace their futures. The writings of Jung and

James gave insights into spiritual awakenings and “*spiritus contra spiritum*,” “the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness” (AA Grapevine).

The AA program helps individuals to make meaning from despair and alienation through the sharing of one's past in light of one's new spiritual transformation. Viktor Frankl states that addiction and its self-imprisonment is a form of existential crisis (Frankl *Man's* 105). By coming through this self-imprisonment, and recognizing one's personal suffering, an individual is able to make meaning from one's past. This allows the individual to change the way they view themselves, and to remove shame from that viewing.

Offering individuals a morally, physically, and spiritually healing community is the hallmark of the AA program. Individuals are shown by example how to live their new lives. They are given opportunities to share and to grow in a community of individuals who have passed over the same hurdles. They are encouraged to bring newcomers, to show them that there is a path free from obsession and sickness, and where they themselves then become an example to follow. The AA program, when properly implemented, brings the alcoholic through a series of stages that encourage personal growth and healing. The program of AA has operated for more than eighty years with its unique method of presenting its program of recovery to individuals.

In this thesis I will analyze the concept of spiritual awakening through the program of AA. I will utilize literature from the early Christian church, demonstrate how those works were an essential part of what comprised the original program of AA, and show how spiritual awakening continues to be the core element that keeps AA

relevant and functioning in 21st century society.

Chapter 1

The Birth of Alcoholics Anonymous

The Oxford Group was a Christian organization with member groups in both Europe and the United States. In New York City, the Oxford Group was led by an Episcopal clergyman, Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, whose charismatic personality and sincere concern for the downtrodden made his work with alcoholics during the early days of the Oxford Group significant. The group was described in an article published in *Good Housekeeping Magazine*:

The Oxford Group has no membership, no dues, no paid leaders. It has no new creed nor theological theories. It does not even have regular meetings. It is merely a fellowship of individuals who seek to follow a certain way of life. A determination, not a denomination, they say. First-century Christian principles in 20th-century application. Identified with it are Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists – members of all churches and none. 'Not a creed,' says its founder, 'but a revitalizing of such creed as the individual may have allowed to decay.' (AA *Pass* 170)

During this time, Wilson was participating in the Oxford Group in New York City. However, he was struggling. Much as he desired to stay sober, he was unable to do so and, after his fourth visit to an alcoholic treatment centre in New York City, he

had begun to see himself as a hopeless case, one who would never manage to maintain his sobriety. During his treatment he had been diagnosed by Dr. W.D. Silkworth, a New York specialist in alcoholism, who has subsequently attained mythical stature in the world of AA. Silkworth described his theory to Wilson by comparing the action of alcohol on chronic alcoholics to an allergy (AA *Alcoholics* xxviii). He said that the craving was limited to those who were chronic alcoholics, and that it never seemed to occur in the average, moderate drinker. Chronic alcoholics who suffer from this allergy can never drink alcohol in any form or quantity, for their habits, once being set, cannot be broken, their self-confidence deteriorates, and they rely on their own abilities, which are weak. They begin to have monumental problems that pile up on them and become increasingly difficult to solve (AA *Pass* 102). This theory took the onus off Wilson, who had been hearing about his lack of willpower and about his moral defects for his entire life. He had never been told that he had a legitimate illness. Although they did not solve his drinking problems, these words were liberating.

During this time, Ebby Thacher, one of Wilson's long-term friends, came by to see him at his home in New York City. Thacher was encouraging Wilson to participate fully in the Oxford Group, to accept the basic tenets of this program, and to apply them to his life. These basic tenets were “the need for moral inventory, confession of personality defects, restitution to those harmed, helpfulness to others, and the necessity of belief in and dependence upon God” (AA *Alcoholics* xvi). Wilson was not convinced, especially about the need to be dependent upon God. The spiritual realm was something that he had given up on long ago in his life, and it was not something that he was about

to go back to easily.

Another member of the Oxford Group, Rowland Hazard, had worked with Carl Jung in 1931. During this time Jung shared some information that was to become vital to the AA program. Jung told Hazard that he felt Hazard was hopeless “so far as any further medical or psychiatric treatment might be concerned” (AA *Grapevine*). According to Wilson, “this candid and humble statement of [Jung's] was beyond doubt the first foundation stone upon which our society has since been built” (AA *Grapevine*). When Hazard asked if there was to be any hope for him at all, Jung replied that “there might be, provided he could become the subject of a spiritual or religious experience – in short, a genuine conversion” (AA *Grapevine*). After this statement, Hazard protested that he was already a believer in God, but Jung countered that to believe was not enough; one must have a genuine “spiritual awakening” (AA *Pass* 114).

Jung also addressed the issues of alienation and isolation, two significant problems facing alcoholics. As alcoholism develops, it leaves the individual progressively more alone, with less influence from and less interaction with the community or society that surrounds them. Jung stated that he was particularly convinced “that the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition, if it is not counteracted by real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community. An ordinary man, not protected in action from above and isolated in society, cannot resist the power of evil, which is called very aptly the Devil” (AA *Grapevine*).

Wilson's friend Thacher continued to share his experiences of the Oxford Group

and encouraged Wilson to attempt to pray for deliverance from his obsessions. Wilson balked at both of these ideas. Thacher took Wilson to an Oxford Group meeting at a New York mission, and Wilson, in an intoxicated state, decided to dedicate his life to Jesus in an altar call whereby he was called to the front of the church and publicly declared his commitment to follow a new life path led by Jesus. That dedication did not have the desired effect on Wilson's life, but it did form part of the process through which he needed to go in order to get to the state in which he could accept and deal with his alcoholism. Wilson continued to drink for a few more days. While at the mission he experienced an extremely charged atmosphere in the meeting room. Wilson was aware of his deep feelings; however, he pushed them aside, claiming that they went against both his education and his reason. Yet his reason had told him that his illness was as incapacitating as that of a cancer patient. If he had suffered from cancer, would he not have done whatever was required to deal with his illness? What was the difference with alcoholism? Wilson considered it a cancer of sorts, as it was eating away at his body, mind, and soul. Finally Wilson began to see his illness clearly, and likened it to a hopeless condition (*AA Pass* 119).

As the effects of his final drinks wore off, Wilson entered a state of depression and rebellion. Wilson wanted what his friend Thacher claimed to have experienced, but he could not believe in what Thacher believed. The further Wilson got away from the experience he had had at the mission, the less he could recall what he had felt. Wilson again entered a treatment facility, and he and his wife were looking for a location in which to place Wilson long-term. Wilson was at the end with nowhere else to go and

nothing else to try. He had used up all of his options and all that was before him was unending darkness, the great abyss. Wilson described what happened to him next,

In his helplessness and desperation, Bill cried out, "I'll do anything, anything at all!" He had reached a point of total, utter deflation – a state of complete, absolute surrender. With neither faith, nor hope, he cried, "If there be a God, let him show Himself!"

What happened next was electric. "Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy – I was conscious of nothing else for a time.

"Then, seen in the mind's eye, there was a mountain. I stood upon its summit, where a great wind blew. A wind, not of air, but of spirit. In great, clean strength, it blew right through me. Then came the blazing thought 'You are a free man.' I know not at all how long I remained in this state, but finally the light and the ecstasy subsided. I again saw the wall of my room. As I became more quiet, a great peace stole over me, and this was accompanied by a sensation difficult to describe. I became acutely conscious of a Presence which seemed like a veritable sea of living spirit. I lay on the shores of a new world. 'This,' I thought, 'must be the great reality. The God of the preachers.'

"Savoring my new world, I remained in this state for a long time. I seemed to be possessed by the absolute, and the curious conviction

deepened that no matter how wrong things seemed to be, there could be no question of the ultimate rightness of God's universe. For the first time, I felt that I really belonged. I knew that I was loved and could love in return. I thanked my God, who had given me a glimpse of His absolute self. Even though a pilgrim upon an uncertain highway, I need be concerned no more, for I had glimpsed the great beyond.” [...] He always said that after that experience, he never again doubted the existence of God. He never took another drink (*AA Pass* 120-121).

This was the moment of which Jung had spoken. This was the magnificent change that was known as a “spiritual awakening.” When Silkworth came to visit Wilson, he described what had happened as perfectly normal. He told Wilson that he had “had some kind of conversion experience [...] you are already a different individual [...] it's so much better than what had you only a couple of hours ago” (*AA Pass* 123). As Jung said, “You see, alcohol in Latin is “*spiritus*” and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*” (*AA Grapevine*). Wilson's battle could be named “alcohol counters spiritualism.”

When Thacher came to visit Wilson later in the week, he brought him a book recommended by the Oxford Group, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James. Though the book was a tough read for Wilson, it did provide him with a number of insights that he applied to both his alcoholism and to his own need for spiritual assistance. He noted three common denominators in the case histories that James

presented. The first was “calamity; each person James described had met utter defeat in some vital area of his life. All human resources had failed to solve his problems. Each person had been utterly desperate” (AA *Pass* 124). The second was the “admission of defeat. Each of the individuals acknowledged his own defeat as utter and absolute” (AA *Pass* 124). The third “was an appeal to a Higher Power. This cry for help could take many forms, and it might or might not be in religious terms [...] Some had thunderbolt experiences [...] others had slow, gradual transformation experiences [...] It brought the sufferer into a new state of consciousness, and so opened the way to release from the old problems” (AA *Pass* 124). These three elements would later become cornerstones of the AA program.

While Wilson was still basking in the glow of his conversion experience, he began to think about why he had been blessed as to receive the gift of grace and why he had received his freedom when so many others simply suffered and died. He determined that the difference between his case and the others was the relationship between himself and Thacher, his friend, and that as a fellow sufferer of alcoholism he could bare his soul to his friend in a way that he could to no one else. Thacher was not a stranger to alcoholism; he was a brother. This bond, this connection, allowed Wilson to keep no secrets.

Around this same time, Wilson began thinking about the creation of a movement that would involve recovering alcoholics helping recovering alcoholics. “My excitement became boundless. A chain reaction could be set in motion, forming an ever-growing fellowship of alcoholics, whose mission it would be to visit the caves of

still other sufferers and set them free” (AA *Pass* 126). Intending to deal with the most basic message, Wilson's idea was that practitioners of all religions would be welcomed. In the spiritual conversion that was to follow the lives of many men and women the world over would change: the “aim was world conversion. Everybody [...] needed changing” (AA *Pass* 128). Wilson became a strong advocate for Christian teaching. Following the teachings of James, he felt that the individual confession of sins must be practiced. In this way, people would be housecleaning, sorting through the messes before they embraced sobriety. This process was called sharing. Not only were people to share their regrets, they were to take some form of action in order to try to rectify the mistakes they had made and the hurts that they had inflicted. This was done through the making of amends. An individual could make practical amends, for instance replacing a window or returning money. They could make amends in kind, whereby amends could be made to some other individual if the individual to whom the hurt was originally done was not available. Or an individual could make a living amends and live differently for the remainder of one's days because nothing could possibly be done to restore, or right, the wrongs that they had committed in the past. In this way, one could hope to restore the personal relationships that had been harmed during one's active alcoholic days.

The practices of prayer and meditation were held by Wilson to be extremely important. He saw them as the keys to remaining centred, grounded, and focused in remaining abstinent. He also believed that in order to remain connected to God, and to live according to high moral standards, one must take time each day to connect to God and find out His will for oneself, and to put one's self-will aside.

All of this was happening through the Oxford Group, and although the Oxford Group was helping alcoholics, this was not its principal focus. Wilson still had a dream that there would one day be an organization of alcoholics for alcoholics. In early 1935 Wilson went to Akron, Ohio on a business trip. The trip did not turn out as he expected, and it left him feeling depleted and anxious and he thought about having a drink. In his desperation, he pulled out a pocketful of nickels and began calling churches in the area to see if there was anyone in their congregations who had a problem with drink with whom he could talk and share his burdens. As he used his penultimate nickel, he was referred to a local man whose medical practice was floundering because of his alcoholism. Wilson used his last nickel to give the man a call. He met with him at his home. Wilson was able to put his theories into practice and, though he was unable that night to interest the man in his vision of a “sobriety group”, he was able to share his personal story with another alcoholic and stay sober himself. The two men became fast friends. Ultimately, the man whom Wilson had contacted became his first successful convert. Dr. Bob Smith became sober on June 10, 1935, the day AA was born.

Chapter 2

The AA Program and Its Founders

As AA began to define its principles, it shifted from an evangelical focus, like that of the Oxford Group, to a non-denominational, all inclusive, format that would appeal to a larger and wider audience. This was not to say that the biblical message was not appropriate for the group, but that AA allowed an individual to choose their interpretation of the message. The language of AA was adapted to move toward language that the “everyman” would find acceptable. The construct of God is broadly interpreted in AA. Members are given freedom to understand this construct in any way that they choose, the only stipulation being that they recognize a Higher Power greater than themselves.

The core elements of the AA program were known as the “Twelve Steps.” These were a series of actions required to be undertaken by the individual in order that they might experience the ultimate freedom from the addiction to alcohol. The core elements of these steps are that the individual must recognize her own powerlessness over her addiction; the individual must turn their life over to the care of God as they understand God; the individual must make a moral inventory and a personal confession; the individual must make amends for harm caused while in the state of addiction. These things being done, the individual will experience a “spiritual awakening” (AA *Pass* 128). Wilson recognized the power of Christian conversion through his own personal

experience but, wanting to make this program acceptable to the vast numbers of struggling alcoholics, especially those who could not accept the boundaries of religion as they had known them throughout their lives, he set about to broaden the base of the program to include the secular community.

This being said, when one reads the principal text book, or the Big Book of AA, as it is known, the message comes across as one that is spiritual, but also religious in content. Written by Wilson, some of the content of the Big Book describes his own experiences. Wilson writes about what brought him to sobriety from his alcoholism: “No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master” (AA *Alcoholics* 8). According to Jung, Wilson's “craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God” (AA *Grapevine*). One of his friends, not knowing the words of Jung, but knowing his own experience, proposed to him that a spiritual solution, a turning over of his will and his mind to the care of God, might be a solution to his alcoholism, but Wilson had rebelled. “When the thought was expressed that there might be a God personal to me this feeling was intensified,” he wrote. “I didn't like the idea. I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature but I resisted the thought of a Czar of the Heavens, however loving His sway might be” (AA *Alcoholics* 12). Then came a radical suggestion: “*Why don't you choose your own conception of God?*” (AA *Alcoholics* 12; italics in original). This hit Wilson like lightening. It revolutionized his

way of thinking, and it was to have a dramatic effect on the organization of AA. “*It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning*” (AA *Alcoholics* 12; italics in original).

Wilson underwent a radical spiritual awakening, complete with bright lights and strong breezes. He stated that this “must be the great reality. The God of the preachers” (AA *Pass* 120). Shortly thereafter, wrote Wilson, “I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch.” (AA *Alcoholics* 13). Wilson never had another drink. He began to assess his life from a God-conscious perspective, and everything looked different. Wilson began to pray and meditate on a daily basis, never praying for himself, but only asking how he could help others. His life had never been like this. Wilson had entered into a “new relationship with [his] Creator; that [he] would have the elements of a way of living which answered all [his] problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty, and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements” (AA *Alcoholics* 13-14).

Wilson recognized that he had been radically altered, that there was no similarity between the man who was yesterday and the man who was present today. Jung explains that such a spiritual experience can only take place in the following way: “The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher

understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism” (AA *Grapevine*). It appears that Wilson had been struck by grace.

Wilson had gone from being a hopeless alcoholic to being a hopeful believer in God, with a new life and a new mission before him. In his early days of healing, the reading of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, struck a chord with Wilson and influenced his thinking about the now developing, but still unnamed, program. He began to think deeply about the nature of God and His presence in our lives. In his own mind the term “God” had generally struck fear and apprehension. He had been much more drawn to spiritual terms and concepts versus religious terms. He was now finding himself calmed by the spirit that had entered his life, whatever he called it, although he was calling it God. He read with great interest that James had written about a spirit of infinite life and a power that is behind all of creation. James came up with many possible names for this power ranging from Kindly Light, Over-Soul, Providence, and Omnipotence; he suggested that the name we use does not matter as long as we recognize that this power is the Infinite Spirit and that we are the individualized spirits. In essence we are the same, merged, differing only in degree (James 92).

There were many instances of connection between Wilson and James, and James influenced Wilson's writing of the AA Big Book. There were instances where James referred to the conversion “especially if it be by crisis, or sudden” (James 162), that we pass through on our way to healing, that is quite similar to the experience of

many alcoholics. Wilson's spiritual experience was supported with James's assertion that "to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (James 157). James referred to confession, which was something that Wilson felt was a vital element in the clearing away of the negative past of the alcoholic. "But on the side of the sinner himself it seems as if the need ought to have been too great to accept so summary a refusal of its satisfaction. One would think that in more men the shell of secrecy would have had to open, the pent-in abscess to burst and gain relief, even though the ears that heard the confession were unworthy" (James 351). And he further deals with confession: "For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness. If he has not actually got rid of it, he at least no longer smears it over with a hypocritical show of virtue – he lives at least upon a basis of veracity" (James 351). And finally, James's strong and powerful statement rang true with Wilson: "God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality, so I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God. We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled [...] God is real since he produces real effects" (James 389). Wilson felt strongly compelled to include God, a Higher Power, in the program as a key to its success. He believed that those struggling with alcoholism were dealing with a spiritual void and required the presence of God in

their lives, but more importantly, required a spiritual awakening in order to determine that God was real in their lives.

As the program continued to take shape in Wilson's mind, he identified certain key elements. The first was that “alcoholism [couldn't be considered] sin” (McDonough 40). Although individuals are responsible for their actions while under the influence of alcohol, they themselves are not sinful or bad. Historically society made moral judgments about alcoholics, seeing them as bad and lacking the willpower to change. Wilson recognized that although he had sinned while he was an active alcoholic, he was not an immoral person. Immediately upon his spiritual awakening and the turning of his will and his life over to the care of God, Wilson faced his many wrongdoings and became willing to give them up to the God of his understanding (Alcoholics 13).

The second key element of the emerging program was the idea that an individual must take a personal “moral inventory”. Wilson identified the seven deadly sins, (pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth) as being the foundation of the alcoholics drinking problem, with one of the most significant being pride (AA *Twelve* 48). Taking a moral inventory refocused the alcoholics attention, away from the symptoms of their disease and forced them to look inward at their problems. In this way, the alcoholic is encouraged to return to the “root” of their drinking problem, to search to find the places where the drinking began to veer out of control, and to go right back to that point in time to begin making amends and searching for answers.

Wilson believed that the need for taking a moral inventory should not be underestimated. He thought that the impact of the deadly sins on the spiritual and

physical health of an individual was significant. A corrupted sense of spiritual identity, resulting in alienation from God and oneself, is the source of much pain. The individual “does not want to be as God wants him to be, and that ultimately means that he does not wish to be what he really, fundamentally, is” (McDonough 45). AA emphasized that two of the gravest issues facing the alcoholic are resentment and self-pity. They must be dealt with on a daily basis: “With the alcoholic, whose hope is the maintenance and growth of a spiritual experience, this business of resentment is infinitely grave. We found that it is fatal. For when harboring such feelings we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the Spirit. The insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again. And with us, to drink is to die” (AA *Alcoholics* 66).

By April 1939, the first copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the Big Blue text book, were being sold in North America. The book presented a complete picture of the AA program, which was known as the “Twelve Steps of Recovery.” The Twelve Steps are a list of spiritual principles. Applied to an alcoholics life they can lift the obsession to drink and enable the individual to become a happy and productive member of society. During the process of working through the steps, a spiritual awakening will occur. The steps are undertaken in sequence, but also in sections. The first section is comprised of the first three steps.

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him* (AA *Alcoholics* 59).

With Step One, alcoholics admit utter defeat and recognize that they are powerless and that their lives have become unmanageable. Step Two brings the recognition of the insanity in which the alcoholic has been living, that their lives cannot be fixed by themselves, and that only a power greater than themselves might be able to assist them in the change. In Step Three the alcoholic calls that power God and agrees to turn their wills and their lives over to Him, asking Him to take over management of their lives. If there is a struggle with calling the power greater than themselves “God,” then it may be called a Higher Power, but it must be a God as it is understood by the individual.

Steps Four and Five followed:

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs (AA *Alcoholics* 59).

As the alcoholic began Step Four, they began “housekeeping”: “The fact was we really hadn't cleaned house, so that the grace of God could enter us and expel the obsession. In no deep or meaningful sense had we ever taken stock of ourselves, made amends to those we had harmed” (AA *Twelve* 32). The alcoholic will make a “searching and fearless moral inventory of [them]selves” by addressing the pride, lust, anger, greed, envy, gluttony, and sloth. Pride heads the way for a reason. Pride, spurred on by fear, leads to self-justification, and is the root of most human difficulties. Pride entices individuals into the arena where individuals pervert and misdirect their demands. Pride justifies their excesses and excuses their failures (AA *Twelve* 48).

Step Five, the practice of confessing “one's imperfections to God, to ourselves,

and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,” is by no means new. It has traditionally been a part of the lives of religious individuals. In today's world, psychiatrists and psychologists listen to the “confessions” of clients on a daily basis, knowing the healing value in sharing thoughts with a trusted and understanding person. “So far as alcoholics are concerned, AA would go even further. Most of us would declare that without a fearless admission of our defects to another human being we could not stay sober. It seems plain that the grace of God will not enter to expel our destructive obsessions until we are willing to try this” (AA *Twelve* 56-57).

Steps Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine, are “process” steps:

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others (AA *Alcoholics* 59).

Steps Six and Seven, the removal of one's defects of character and one's shortcomings, happens through prayer and through the act of daily attempting to be observant of them in one's life. It is only through a lifetime of working through this process that one can hope to rid oneself of resentment and anger, fear and cowardice, self-pity, self-justification, self-importance, lying, impatience, envy, procrastination, and other shortcomings (AA *Alcoholics* 58-88). An attempt to better oneself is made each day.

Step Eight requires one to “ma[k]e a list [...] and bec[o]me willing to make amends.” Nothing more is asked of the alcoholic than to “bec[o]me willing” to make amends. The mind must be oriented to begin the process of making amends. For Step

Nine asks them to make the spiritual, physical, and emotional, amends to those individuals they have harmed during their active addiction. This can take many years, or may never happen at all, but you are to make the amends wherever possible, and wherever it would not injure another individual.

The final steps are steps toward personal spiritual growth. These lead individuals to live their lives under new direction. Having cleaned up the wreckage of the past, they are free to move into a new and powerful method of daily spiritual living.

- 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him* praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
- 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs (AA *Alcoholics* 59).

Step Ten requires a daily commitment to: “[Continue] to take personal inventory and when we [are] wrong, promptly [admit] it.” Step Eleven is also practiced each day. Prayer and meditation are required so that one is able to stay in conscious contact with the God of one's own understanding. Giving up one's own will and asking for direction each day allows individuals to stay on the path of honesty and personal spiritual growth.

The Twelfth Step is both a step of completion and an action step. By employing the other steps actively in one's life, a new life has begun. Spiritual awakenings are the mechanism for change in AA. As individuals travel from steps one through eleven they “turn their lives over to God[,] ask Him to remove defects of character[,] and seek

through prayer and meditation to improve conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for them and the power to carry it out” (AA *Alcoholics* 59). As members live their new lives in abstinence, the program further develops the Twelve Promises which outline the “new freedom and happiness” (AA *Alcoholics* 83) that they will come to know as they work through the program.

The Big Book states that there are many definitions of spiritual awakening. Spiritual awakenings are personal and thus unique. However, there are also recognizable elements in this experience. When an individual has had a spiritual awakening, he is now able to “do, feel, and believe that which he could not be before on his unaided strength and resources alone. He has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being. He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered” (AA *Twelve* 106). In a very concrete way the individual has been transformed, and has hold of a new source of strength that had previously been absent to him. “He finds himself in possession of a degree of honesty, tolerance, unselfishness, peace of mind, and love of which he had thought himself quite incapable. What he has received is a free gift, and yet usually, at least in some small part, he has made himself ready to receive it” (AA *Twelve* 107).

Step Twelve requires that alcoholics “[vow] to practice these principles in all our affairs” and “to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” This step affects all aspects of members' lives. They begin to live the program fully, at work, at home, and in the community, while at the same time searching out individuals who

could benefit from the message of AA. The program becomes self-perpetuating, one alcoholic sharing the message with another, each keeping the other sober. But more than that, individuals assist one another in developing within themselves the spiritual awakening that results from following the program. They share their spiritual gifts and their time and energy, and they become role models of what it means to be recovering alcoholics. The founders created a program whereby members share hope, faith, and grace, in a world in which those qualities are in short supply.

Chapter 3

The Theological Underpinnings of the AA Principles: Saint Paul

Having explored the birth of the AA program, and having an introduction to the qualities of the program as it was originally visualized and brought to fruition by the founders, an examination of the historic theological underpinnings of the AA principles will be undertaken. In the years prior to the official organization of AA, the membership was loosely gathered together and based in a Christian organization known as the Oxford Group. When AA separated itself from this group in order to become a stand-alone society, it took with it a significant number of the basic tenets of the original group, and in conjunction with the personal beliefs of Wilson and Smith, AA found itself directly shaped by the writings of the early Christian writers St. Paul and St. Augustine. The ideas of Paul will be examined in two distinct streams of thought. First, I will review the scholarly interpretation of his writing in Romans 7:13-25, leading to an Augustinian interpretation of the same passage. Second, I will explore the-Flesh-versus-the-Spirit dichotomy and then relate it to Augustine and the divided will, that bear strong parallels to the struggles faced by those who suffer from alcoholism today.

There is perhaps no book in the Bible that has been so deeply studied, no section that has engendered such controversy, and of which has been provided as many differing interpretations, as Romans 7:13-25 written by Paul (Barrett 140). Looking at a basic cross-section of these divergent commentaries will show the level to which

interpretation changes from scholar to scholar. This study will approach the works of C.K. Barrett, N.T. Wright, and R. Jewett, as well as providing insights into a personal understanding of this passage as Augustine perceived it. This will then allow for an application of this passage onto the subject of alcoholism.

In Paul's letter we find the key themes of the law and sin, the struggle between them, and the manner in which they impact on each other.

13 Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 or what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. 16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. 20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward

man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. Romans 7:13-25 (NKJV)

Barrett begins his commentary of Roman's 7:13-25 by stating that the “law” as utilized in this section of Romans may be paraphrased to mean “the Old Testament religion,” also holding that the use of the word Law implies that it is the Torah which is here being studied (140). Barrett describes the “Law” as a gift from God to his chosen people, and that the Law is not sinful in itself, though there is a distinct relationship between the Law and sin. According to Barrett, Paul's meaning of “knowing sin” is that one must not simply be aware of its existence, one must have experienced it, thereby the Law does not simply help to detect sin, but it is an aid to, and an initiator of, sin upon individuals (Barrett 141). In knowing the Law, desire manifests itself as the will of the ego that has shown itself to be the nature of sin. No matter the individual, desire becomes the controlling essence, the law, of one's being and one's own being then becomes Lord, in a idolatrous way. This is against the Law, leaving man with two rules: “Thou shalt not desire – Thou shalt obey” (Barrett 141). 7:13 may relate to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to the command that man and woman should not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden, and through that commandment they were tempted by the serpent to do evil. From this experience, man

was led to sin through woman and her desire (Barrett 145). When one is prohibited from some sort of action, desire is awakened that leads to conflict in the soul. It is possible that Paul was using this story to share of his own story as the next verses seem somewhat autobiographical (Barrett 143).

The term “carnal, sold” relates to the flesh in a negative sense and means sold as a slave and having come under the power of sin, where sin has control over the individual. Paul is still referring to carnal man as being the cause of death. Though the Law is not to be held to blame in man's conflict against God, “I” am also not to blame, for I know that the Law is good, and I disapprove of the sins which I have committed. Who is then to blame? It is sin that lives in me which is to blame (7:17). Paul is still referring to the Law as being from God, and humankind as being dominated by sin, though for Paul the term flesh may refer both to the physical aspects of being human, and also to the inclination that all individuals have toward sin (Barrett 146). Sin becomes the personified evil power that resides within human nature and is the controlling force of man's actions (Barrett 147). There is a great distinction between the “I” and the “flesh” as referred to in 7:18. The flesh is that which pulls a human being in the direction of sin, an “element in human nature so completely under the power of sin that not only is there no good in it, it corrupts all man's activity” (Barrett 148). Paul has now proposed that in all matters the Law is good, and also that the conscience is blameless. By being in agreement with the Law, the conscience denounces evil behaviour and recognizes that evil is caused by sin, that resides in and prevails upon the flesh. In 7:22-23 the terms “inner self” and “inner man” are introduced and they relate to the internal Christian life, though it also has further eschatological meaning.

The term “inward man” also relates to the Age to Come, when Christ will return, and the term “outward man” relates to the present era, the era of death, physical and spiritual. In this way the inner man is the “new man,” the new creation made in Christ himself (Barrett 150). The use of the term “members” relates to “actual corporeal existence, in which I am determined by the conditions of life in this (fallen) world; or, better, in this present age” (Barrett 150). In 7:24-25, Paul refers to the body, or human nature, which through the Law and through sin has fallen under the power of death. Man requires deliverance from a state of being under a Law which is no longer a comfort to him. The Jewish religion with Law-observance, no longer holds the answers to Paul's questions. Christ is the answer (Barrett 151).

Thus, for Barrett, the thrust of Romans 7 is to illustrate that while the Torah and sin are intimately connected, there is nothing the Law can do to make us sinless, for in creating in us an enslavement to sinful desires, the Law leads us to spiritual and physical death. It is only in Christ that the power of the Law and sin on the believer falls away and leads one toward true life in the Spirit.

Wright begins his overview commentary of Roman's 7:13-25 suggesting that the use of the word “Law” represents the Jewish Law, Torah (549). He reads this section of Romans as regarding covenant renewal and involving covenant affirmation between God and Israel, implying transformation of the old to the new. The old involves the states of death and sin, while renewal brings righteousness, and will be of both creation and God's people (Wright 550). Wright is very interested in the “I” that is prevalent throughout this entire passage of Romans, beginning with the assertion that “the baptized Christian is not 'in sin,' not 'in the flesh,' and not 'under the Law'” (551), and

also that Paul would not change his thinking over these passages to suddenly view Christians in 7:14 as “carnal, sold under sin,” or in 7:25 as enslaved by the flesh to the law of sin.

Wright recognizes that there are many interpretations of Romans 7:13-25, ranging from “the portrait of a moral struggle,” to “the experience of a non-Christian,” to the theme of the “Christian who is still struggling to live a holy life by means of Law” (552). He proposes that this may, in fact, be Paul's own story, written as a Jew who had lived under the Law and that this passage was not written to be a transcript of “how it felt at the time,” but what it was like to live under the Law, pre and post-conversion (552-3), and Wright uses the language of conversion when analyzing this passage. Wright feels that this is Paul's “own story, and he will feel its theological tension and pain as his own” (553). He suggests that Paul's use of language, such as “my flesh,” and not using “they” when referring to non-Christian Jews, was effective as a manner of keeping people from feeling distanced from him, of keeping the problems relevant, and the dilemma of Israel close at hand.

Paul's discussion of sin in this passage is to state that sin is slowly killing the entire human race, and the manifestations of sin in this world are the actions that run opposite to God, the Law, and Torah in particular. God's manner of dealing with sin is in understanding that sin has contaminated the complete human race, including Israel. Also, that there is no Law that could possibly be created that would be able to address the problem, and therefore, “if life could come by the law, then the law would have been the means of covenant membership and hence of life” (Wright 566). In order that humanity be freed from the clutches of sin, through the grace of Jesus Christ, sin must

be condemned, and this happens in the flesh of the Messiah, representing both Israel and Adam where sin has abounded. In 7:14, Paul places Torah on the good side of the equation, the God-side, and places the “I” on the sin-side, the Adam-side; the Jew, Israel, as a slave to sin and death on the flesh side. In 7:18-19 the idea of sin indwelling within the “I,” within the “flesh,” is negative, and the point Paul makes, according to Wright, is that “what indwells someone is what gives them power to perform that which otherwise they would want to do but remain incapable of” (568); if there is nothing good that indwells me, then I am unable to bring forth anything good. Paul is making a certain distinction between the “I” that wills or does not will, and the “flesh” where sin dwells and where good does not dwell (Wright 568). However, the Torah is powerless to preclude sin from doing what it wills in the flesh, and ultimately sin brings about death. Wright suggests that 7:20 is concerned with removing the blame from Torah while showing its relevancy in the realms of sin and death, while simultaneously attempting to show that the “I,” though fleshly and the domain of sin, is cleared, while still being susceptible to sin and death.

According to Wright, Paul is resolute in his position to maintain the special relationship between God and the covenant with Israel, the integrity of being Jewish, and the impossibility of discovering eschatological life within that Jewishness alone. In looking for escape “from this body of death,” Wright points out in 7:24 that Israel is Adamic, and shares in the sinfulness of all human beings. The “I” finds it impossible to break free from this body of death, recognizing a connection between its own “fleshly” state and the “solidarity of sin” with which it is undeniably connected (571). 7:25b fits very well with the thinking proposed by Wright throughout his analysis, that the “I of

myself” implies “I, Paul, as part of the solidarity of Israel according to the flesh” (572).

For Wright, the issue of Romans 7 is that of transformation from the pre-Christ covenantal relationship between God and Israel into a new covenant. As a traditional Jew, the passage claims that neither the person, the “I,” nor the Torah are able to preclude sin, which indwells all people and are part and parcel of the Old Covenant. With the New Covenant established under the Messiah, by way of Christ, came a special relationship between God and believer. For Paul, the baptized Christian is not in sin, not in the flesh where sin resides, nor under the Law which condemns the person. This is where the “I,” susceptible to sin and death, is cleared of sin and becomes a slave to God.

Jewett's analysis of Roman's 7:13-25 begins with the recognition that the Law was intended to provide peace and justice for the Jewish people, but it was co-opted by sin that turned the Law into a vehicle for declaring superiority over others. This came out of Paul's pre-conversion experience of declaring his opposition to the gospel in an attempt to secure personal righteousness, bringing him into a struggle with the Messiah, Christ, and under the anger of God. This adversarial lifestyle was altered through Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Jewett 460). Jewett notes that Paul finds the overt nature of sin to be such, that it corrupts what is best about the Law into a method of dominating others and substantiating the accomplished nature of one's own religious group. Jewett will analyze this entire pericope concentrating on Paul's paradigmatic situation prior to his conversion (473).

The term “flesh” in 7:14 relates to the manner in which individuals live under the influence of immoral systems of shame and honour, where the will to outdo others

corrupts the good that one hopes to accomplish. The word “flesh” in secular Greek calls attention to obesity, to human limitation, and to the likelihood of corruption, suggesting a physical, materialistic, orientation removed from the Spirit, one that is specifically Pauline (Jewett 461). 7:15-16 explain what it means to be “sold under sin,” noting that evil is plainly in view, and the actions of humanity are performed by sin as an independent power, leaving responsibility for these actions clearly identified as sinful. The underlying root of Paul's problem confirms human weakness as being his downfall (Jewett 464).

7:17-20 explain how an impartial kind of contradiction between willing and attaining the good is caused by sin. Paul again restates that the “I,” the ego is “sold under sin,” and that it is sin, not the ego, that manifests the contradiction integral in the zealotry of religion. Thus, there is a denial of human culpability for sinful outcomes, but, according to Jewett, the expression “the sin dwelling in me” makes it clear that the self and sin are unable to be separated and are therefore both reciprocally responsible for such results (467). Though the zealot's will was not to oppose God's will, the indwelling of sin modifies obedience into a means of acquiring status, and therefore there was a significant contradiction between actions intended and actions actually achieved. According to Jewett, 7:18-19 illustrate how motivation to do good is defeated by sinful measures. The use of the verb “I know” indicates Paul's personal experience with this passage, his inability to do the desired good, and to live within the Law. The mention of the term “flesh,” and its negation, refers to the ability of the flesh to modify the Law into a system that revolves around the acquisition of status, thereby frustrating the Law's ability to produce the good that was desired (Jewett 467-8).

7:19 reflects the good that Paul desired to accomplish, as a persecutor of the church, was in fact the adherence to Torah as a method of welcoming the messianic age. In his desire to do the will of God, he found out that he was actually opposing the will of God (Jewett 468). The zealousness with which Paul approached his duties under the Law was for status and bravado and what Paul discovered on the road to Damascus was that this zealousness was a bold show of the power of sin, acting out at the centre of religious power. In this way sin was used to illustrate that it was a forceful power, able to lead people to behave in definitive ways, “a demonic social power deriving from a distorted system of honor and shame that had infected religion as well as the political realm, had been internalized by Paul so that it “dwelled” within him and led him to act as he did” (Jewett 468). Jewett translates 7:22 as “for I share pleasure in the law of God,” and continues that the shared pleasure in the Law of God is according to Paul's inward man, and that Paul was the first to have utilized this inner/outer man phrase. Paul's inner man is being replenished by the Spirit, while his outer man is open to persecution and eventual death (470).

7:23 contains the passage referring to the “law in my members,” which has been problematic for many. Some have suggested that Paul struggled with sexual desire, but Jewett states that this passage, in conjunction with the “law of my mind,” can be taken to express the material side of humanity holding the spiritual side in subjugation. In this manner, bodily “members” are a part of the zealous action that was witnessed under the Law and reveals individuals who are subjugated to the power of sin (470). Paul uses military terms when discussing the action of war-making and that defeat at war in the Roman Empire would imply slavery, death, or execution at the conclusion of a victory

march. As most of the members of early churches were either slaves or former slaves, they understood this language. Paul's view was to remind the early churchgoers that they "were themselves evidence of having already been taken prisoner by sin. The impulse to crusade against others on behalf of one's view of the Law was in this sense "the law of sin at work in my members"" (Jewett 471). Paul's use of the first person possessive "my" makes for a powerful connection of his own experience with the Law, thereby circumventing any accusations against individuals in Rome. In 7:24, the "body of death" being referred to relates to the pre-conversion Saul who pursued evil against the Church, though he desired to do good via the Law.

Jewett's understanding of this passage is that the Jewish Torah was a system of shame and honour personally internalized by Paul which led him to come into direct conflict with his God as he zealously pursued the fulfilling of this Law. In this letter to the Roman congregation, Paul warns that while the Law is good, its application is subverted by the sinful motivations dwelling in us, leading to frustrated good intentions. Only a confrontation with Christ can lead to a desired renewal of the "inward man," while never complete, to be continually replenished by the Spirit.

The final interpretation of Romans 7:13-25 reflects a summation of the experiences of many individuals, both Christian and non-Christian, who struggle with their motivations to act admirably in their daily lives. The struggles enable a person to make the right decisions, to behave with integrity, with consideration, to do the right thing when the wrong thing looks so appealing, and perhaps seems so much easier. For the Christian who works hard to mature in one's faith, this passage serves as a reminder of the power of sin even in the lives of the faithful. This division within the self is

clearly visible within the life of Paul himself, as he allows himself to be held up as the example.

As Paul moves through this passage in Romans he becomes more critical of his own behaviour and, offers the responsibility for his personal transformation to Jesus Christ, while still continuing in the enslavement of sin. Though this is a distinctly Christian passage, it holds broad application as the universal human condition of conflict between willing and doing, between the desires of the mind and the desires of the flesh. This is seen in Paul's discussion of contrasting desires. He expresses the desire to do that which is right and good (7:19), spiritual (7:14), and in being a delight in God's Law (7:22). However, he is tormented by the ongoing desire, propelled by sin itself (7:17) to do those things which he regrets, and which he experiences as slavery (7:14), and evil (7:19), things which keep him a prisoner (7:23) of that from which he wishes he were free.

One can see parallels between this passage and the personal experiences of addiction. If we look closely at the passage we will see a number of verses to take note of. In terms of the mind, he does not "understand what I do," for the things that "I want to do I do not do" and "what I hate I do" (7:15). There is a sense that a power stronger than his own will has overtaken him, when he says, "it is no longer I myself who do it, but sin that dwells in me" (7:17). This power is one that he cannot control, one that seems to act of its own accord, "for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (7:18). This power has a life of its own, "now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me" (7:20). There is a compulsion to do that which is against his best interests. "I see another law in my

members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (7:23). All of these passages are similar to the comments made by those who are addicted who wish to quit drinking alcohol but are unable to do so. They try, but they cannot maintain their decision. Their willpower leaves them, and some other power seems to take over, leaving them vulnerable to the power of their addiction. This is the concept of the divided self expressed in both the writings of Paul and also in the lives of those who struggle with addiction.

In this excerpt from Romans, Paul focuses on the distinction between “willing” and “doing” as the areas of decision-making that a person is forced to go through on life's journey. In Romans 7:19 we see the tension between the desire to do good, the willingness to do good, and yet the inability to do that which is desired. All human beings struggle with the conflict created between the mind and the body (7:15), with the desire to do good coming from the mind and the inability to carry that out coming from the flesh (7:23) (Lattimore 54).

The struggle with addiction, similar to the struggle with sin, resides within our personal relationship to the self we desire to become. This is not to say that this is the only way it can be understood, but within this relationship are the seeds of the division of the self, the Pauline concept whereby we separate ourselves within ourselves, feeling compelled to do things that in our heart we truly do not wish to do, and yet are unable to stop ourselves from doing. This struggle with “willing” and “doing” is, at its core, the essence of addiction.

Paul utilizes the description of the divided self to indicate how human beings struggle with the crises of the divided self. These conflicts are similar to those that the

addict goes through as they struggle within themselves, and they deal with the mental obsessions, to drink or not to drink, between the bodily cravings and the mind telling them no. In reflection it would seem that the manner in which Paul struggles with sin is quite similar in nature to real lived experiences of obsession, compulsion and desire experienced by those living with alcoholism. Both Paul and the addicted soul recognize the enslavement of human beings via behaviour. Paul accepts the human limitations of sin living within and of evil being a real force to be reckoned with. This can equally be applied to the struggling alcoholic. There is a realization that though the individuals are struggling with different desires, each are powerful nonetheless.

Augustine quoted and interpreted many of these same verses in *Confessions*. Struggling as he did with sexual obsession he read and understood this passage to be related to the individuals' struggle with sinfulness versus the individuals' struggle with the Law. He referenced 7:17, “but now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me,” with regards to his habits that had him bound, and his personal struggle between the Flesh and the Spirit. His interpretation of the “law of sin which is in my members” (7:22), related to his body and again the “habit by which even the unwilling mind is dragged down and held” (*Conf.* VIII.v.12). Augustine read and understood Paul's passage to be referring to the mental chains which held him attached to his sexual habits and kept him separated from God. Augustine struggled with the self that was willing and the self that was unwilling causing internal conflict and led him to be dissociated with himself. This came about against his will, and was punishment suffered due to his sinful behaviours within his own mind. Augustine states, “and so it was 'not I' that brought this about 'but sin which dwelt in me' (7:17, 20), sin resulting

from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was the son of Adam” (*Conf.* VIII.x.22). His sinful nature originated with Adam, but it was he who encouraged its development within himself. When Augustine was a young man, he and some friends stole some pears. Augustine recognized early on that it was not his desire to enjoy the pears, but it was his desire to enjoy “merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong” (*Conf.* II.iv.9). Augustine became enmeshed in the lifestyle of sin. Though he had been raised to know good from evil, he allowed himself to be drawn into evil pursuits which took over his mind and his body. Augustine loved the self-destruction and pursued it actively, recognizing that he had an internal hunger that was torturing him. He attempted to fill this hunger with sensual pleasures and found himself being seduced and being a seducer. When Augustine interpreted Rom. 7:13-25 he read it as if it were applicable to him specifically. In 7:13 his physical compulsions were overwhelming him, something that, if it had been controlled through the institution of marriage it would have been sanctioned, but was hereby lustful and sinful. In 7:14 he understood himself to be carnal, sold under sin, and he applied 7:15 where what he is doing he does not understand, and what he wills to do he does not practice, but he does what he hates, to his own life. In 7:18 Augustine comes to realize that his fleshly desires are where sin grows, and it is this struggle that continues to plague him. Augustine recognizes that evil is present within him, and yet, he also wants to change internally. He wants to be a better man, to leave his habits and obsessions behind. Augustine saw this passage clearly to the end as reflecting his life. The warring between the law of his mind and the law of sin which is in his members concluded with his final submission of his mind and will to serve the Law of God, but still with his

flesh he was obsessed and sinful, something he struggled with until after his conversion.

Chapter 4

The Dichotomy of Flesh and Spirit in Paul

Having traced the roots of AA through its birth, its history, and through the program as designed by its founders, an examination of the theological underpinnings of the AA principles has been undertaken beginning with exploration of the writings of Paul in Romans 7, and continuing with this work on the dichotomy of the flesh and the spirit in Paul. When the program of AA was being developed it took bits and pieces from historic Christian sources and merged them with sources relevant to the day. This created material that has a timeless quality about it, material that seems both historic and yet current at the same time. The comprehension of Paul regarding a “mind governed by the flesh” (Rom 8:6), relates very closely to the struggles faced by those who endure the pains of alcoholism today.

The program of AA is, at its core, a program that seeks to help an individual change from being motivated only by desire, obsessive desire, to one that is motivated by the will to do that which is good, honest, unselfish, and propelled by God (AA *Alcoholics* 13-14). In the New Testament Paul writes, “the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want” (Gal 5:17) (NIV). There is a feeling of remarkable similarity between the program of AA and the writing of Paul. The desire of the flesh holds sway over the individual, while the spirit, which is the presence of God in man (Willard 153), pushes back against the insistent presence of

the flesh. The desire of the flesh does not have to be alcohol, it can be any temptation or lust, any vice that separates the individual from God. It is, in effect, the human condition. “The mind governed by the flesh is death” (Rom 8:6), because it relies upon human strength and capability alone, and forsakes the loving-kindness of God. Living by the flesh alone will lead to “destruction” (Gal 6:8), the natural outcome of living a life controlled by desires.

This type of lifestyle can be equated with addiction, for living by flesh is living by desire, and addiction is living by unrestricted desire. To live by the flesh is to care for nothing but one's own satisfaction, being willing to sacrifice anything to get to the heart of desire. “This overriding drive for gratification is the genuine root of 'weakness of the will'” (Willard 154). Chaos accompanies unrestricted desire as it moves towards gratification. This desire is deceitful as it can never fulfill, and it continues to torment as it tugs us ever towards sensual satisfaction. In 1 Peter 2:11 we are reminded that “fleshly lusts wage war against the soul.” The nature of “flesh” is similar to the nature of addiction, where personal will and desire are given free reign and the characteristics of emptiness, dissatisfaction, and rebelliousness are used to describe everyday life.

The works of the flesh were given the following description in the writing of Galatians: “Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal 5:19-21). That drunkenness is on the list is a reminder as to how significant a problem it has been and for how long. The vice of drunkenness is not only about the over-consumption of alcohol. It is also about what people do, what their behaviour is, while under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol abuse,

and its related behaviours, have far reaching affects, much greater than simply towards the participating individual. The same then as now, families and communities are affected by individuals under the influence of alcohol and relationships are poisoned.

By contrast, the works of the Spirit are very different from the works of the flesh, or unrestricted desire. The Spirit “considers alternatives. That is its essential nature [...] it takes a broad view of possibilities: not just of one desire and its object, but of other desires and goods [...] so the human will or spirit, the power of choice, always seeks a wider perspective than 'what I want'” (Willard 155). In Galatians 5:22 the gifts of the spirit are listed as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Just as the program of AA lists the gifts of the program as the resolution of fear, the replacement of dishonesty with honesty, the introduction of joy, the presence of serenity, persistence, the shift from selfishness to kindness and goodness, the development of faith and courage, and strength to do the right thing (AA *Alcoholics* 66-71). There is a remarkable similarity between Paul's presentation of the gifts of the Spirit and AA's understanding of the gifts of a successfully completed program that has been undertaken with the power of a God of the individual's own understanding.

The flesh/spirit antithesis is one that relates to our human weaknesses, and principle among these is the concept of desire. For Paul it was a significant concept in his account of human sinfulness. For the element of desire rules the individual, taking control and putting the flesh ahead of the Spirit. Paul understood flesh to be equated with sinfulness. The struggle with addiction, similar to the struggle with sin, resides within a personal relationship to the self one desires to become. This is not to say that

this is the only way it can be understood, but within this relationship are the seeds of the division of the self, the Pauline concept whereby we separate ourselves within ourselves, feeling compelled to do things that in our heart we truly do not wish to do, and yet are unable to stop ourselves from doing. This struggle with “willing” and “doing” is, at its core, the essence of addiction. The three types of the will, according to Willard, are the impulsive, the reflective and the embodied will. The impulsive will is simply choosing that which you desire and acting upon it. The reflective will is “oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, in their communal setting, not merely to what is desired” (Willard 156). This is a much more balanced position. The third perspective, the embodied will, “is where impulsive will or reflective will has settled into your body to such an extent that you automatically, without prior deliberation, do what they dictate. This is a sad - even a tragic - condition for those who have allowed their desires to enslave their will” (Willard 156). The embodied will is that which must be changed. It is this realm that is the starting point of transformation for Paul. It is also the starting point for the recovery program of AA. It recognizes that the openness to grace provides the addict with the prospect of true freedom, while the power of desire only brings further slavery in the addictive process.

Inner transformation, or spiritual awakening, will lead to a freedom from the embodied will. This transformation occurs, according to the program of AA, through the working of the Twelve Steps. In Paul's life it occurred while he was still known as Saul. In Acts 9:1-22 we read that Saul was a persecutor of the early Christian church and that, as he neared Damascus on one of his oppressor journeys, he was struck down to the ground and had an encounter with the living Christ. This experience changed

Saul forever. Subsequent to this happening he became known as the Apostle Paul. This experience that Paul underwent was similar to that experienced by Wilson of AA, as both were surrounded by incredibly bright lights, a common descriptor in spiritual transformation experiences, and both left each of them completely internally transformed. “Let us be as clear as possible. When we speak of spiritual formation we are speaking of the formation of the human spirit. The spirit is the will or the heart, and, by extension, our character, which, in practice, lives mainly in our bodies” (Willard 157). As the flesh and the spirit dichotomy is resolved, internally bringing peace and serenity to the individual, a new life is begun. The practice of sinfulness is put aside in an attempt to live for God.

Paul saw sin as a breach in the relationship with God. When we are sinning we are not in communion with God, we have lost our connection to God, we have divided our self from God and His desires for us. We have turned to living life “in the flesh” and away from living life “in the spirit”. Paul recognized that sin was the natural human condition and that the struggle to overcome sin was the only way to reconcile this relationship with God. For Paul, the power of sin in the lives of people was powerful. He saw that it led to self-indulgence when natural appetites become transformed into harmful obsessions, such as eating into gluttony and sexual relations into lust. Sin also manifested itself in the form of other vices, such as drunkenness, adultery, and greed. Paul understood sin to be intimately connected to the death of the individual and this death could be both physical as well as spiritual. These same concepts extended forward into Paul's discussion regarding sinfulness. As Paul saw it, grace was a gift from God, poured out onto human suffering through Jesus Christ, and

sinfulness was a part of the “everyman”, that which all suffered from and the redemption of which was only available through the love of Christ.

The work of moving from the flesh into the Spirit is fundamentally the work of God. The individual is an active participant, and “we simply refuse natural desires the right to direct our life” (Willard 158). This ties in with the third step of AA, “made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood him” (AA *Alcoholics* 59), recognizing that any movement between the world of the flesh and the world of the Spirit is divinely ordained, but that it also requires individual action. “We make a general surrender of the right to get what we want in favor of the call to do what is good under God” (Willard 158).

Contrary to Paul's beliefs, the more recent Christian Church has taken a moral model versus a disease model towards those who succumbed to addiction. Individuals were believed to be “sinful” by the very nature of their behaviour and were judged harshly by the church and its congregants. This position stresses that it is an individual's willpower that has failed him and, with appropriate determination, a correction of one's behaviour can be made. This Christian approach further sees addictive behaviour as a sin that one commits with intent, and therefore one is morally corrupt, versus something that has taken a hold of an individual, something whereby they are by themselves unable to change their behaviour.

For Paul, freedom from the enslavement of a sinful human nature is acquired when the Spirit has won out over the flesh. In the Christian community this involves receiving the grace of God. This is not to say that the only methodology for recovery from addiction is through Christianity. It is not. It is, however, the same freedom that is

the goal of the individual who suffers from addiction, a spiritual freedom; the freedom from obsession, from compulsion, from self-will run riot. There is an inherently similar tension that exists within all addicts or non-addicts, Christian or non-Christian. This is the behaviour that was identified by Paul in his recognition of the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. One that recognizes a solution for this inner conflict to be that existential leap of faith into the grace of God through Jesus Christ. This is a similar leap of faith that is encouraged in the spiritual recovery program of AA.

Chapter 5

The Divided Will: Saint Augustine

Having made a case for the relationship between the Pauline understanding of the dichotomy of the flesh and the Spirit, and the program of AA, we turn to the Augustinian concept of the divided will, that grew out of the writings of Paul, and also played a significant role in the program of AA. Each individual has one will and in choosing what to do with that one will, it becomes reflexive, working on itself. The will may find itself torn by two different desires, the good desire being God, the *summum bonum*, represented by eternal Law, knowledge and reason (Cook 58). At the same time, our habits, customs, and powers of the flesh also place significant alternate desire on the individual. Thus, Augustine's will was divided between the good, and the force of habit that tugged at him. If one acquiesces to the lower will, the lower will begins to assume power over the higher will and the will then becomes further divided in itself. According to Augustine in the *Confessions*, the individual must find ways to break free from the bad habits that chain them to old customs, old memories, and previous ways of living. The individual must begin to make her will over into something that aims towards the higher good, thus moving towards a united, or integrated, will. The program of AA parallels the writings of Paul and Augustine, and can be clearly related to alcoholism and recovery in our modern, secular society. As individual alcoholics follow the program of AA, they will find themselves living with less of a divided will and more of a unified will. Looking more closely at Augustine's writings will develop

this concept.

Augustine's principal philosophical understanding is the “*summum bonum*: the supreme good.” This supreme good is only to be found in God, and ultimately it is God alone who is able to satisfy our needs. This is important to Augustine's defining understanding of the human will. For Augustine, the will rather than the individual behaviour was the principle focus of ethical concern. It was also the first cause of sin, as it is the freedom of the will, and its tendency to be torn in differing directions, that is at the root of human sinfulness (Seesengood 115).

Augustine spent much time studying with the Manicheans. It was here where he first learned the theory that individuals have two wills, and depending on which will one is drawn towards, good or bad, one's behaviours will be reflected by that will. It is also here where Augustine's discussion of evil began. Augustine did not recognize evil as a thing or a substance but rather as the negative outcome of one's defective will. Evil descends from the soul, and includes enslavement to one's baser instincts, lust, anger, gluttony, pride. The point about them all is that one finds oneself turned away from the light that is God, and pointed towards the darkness (Cary 7). Augustine defined evil as an absence. He states, “evil, is nothing but the diminishment of good to the point where nothing at all is left” (*Conf.* III.vi.12), a description of an inner void.

Over time, Augustine came to see things quite differently from that of the Manicheans. He saw the goal of the will is to be unified and also believed that the will has an intrinsic capacity for self-determination. For Augustine the struggle man underwent to live a moral life was dependent upon his ability to master his human will (Kalpakgian 1). Here Augustine raises the concept of the divided will and he gives us

the explanation in the *Confessions* that his new will was being developed within him.

And yet, it was “not yet strong enough to conquer my older will, which had the strength of old habit. So, my two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration” (VIII.v.10). Augustine also believed that there were many times when he found himself unable to pursue or endorse one way without also simultaneously being drawn towards the other. He was unable to master his own will. Just as Augustine had struggled with his will, so too had Wilson from AA struggled. Wilson was unable to make a resolution and keep it. He found himself with a desperate desire to stop drinking and yet an inability to conform his actions to his will (*AA Alcoholics* 7).

As Augustine compares himself to Paul, he continued to struggle within himself. He believed that he was held by sin, trapped by his body and mind. It is here that Augustine makes a connection to addiction by relating sin to habit, equating how the unwilling mind is held by habit, only able to follow that path to habit (*Conf.* VIII.v.12). Not every situation in life is so simple as to have a good will opposing a bad will. There are many cases where we may be torn in multiple directions simultaneously, and certainly Augustine felt that he was divided within, separated from the unity he so craved (*Conf.* II.i.I). This is a theme that runs throughout the *Confessions* whereby he indicates that even when all of one's thoughts are good, they are still somehow in conflict with one another. At some juncture a commitment is finally made and all of one's thoughts are drawn together (VIII.x.24).

Augustine continues to expand the concept of the divided will. Each individual has one will and chooses what to do with that will. In the act of willing, the will

becomes self-referential, working on itself. The will may find itself torn by two different and desired elements, the good element being God. This is where Augustine says we should be spending our lives, pursuing and committing our lives to this path. It is not simply a single decision made one time, it is about a course of action to live in, to persist in. At the same time, according to Augustine, the other element, our habits, customs, and powers of the flesh, pull us as well. "My old loves held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: 'Are you getting rid of us?' and 'from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever' [...] they were not confronting me face to face on the road, but [it was] as if they were furtively tugging at me as I was going away, trying to persuade me to look back" (*Conf.* VIII.xi.26). Thus, Augustine's will was divided between the good and the force of habit that tugged at him. Augustine was being toyed with. His baser instincts, his habits, were challenging his higher will. Like anyone who struggles with a divided will, where one wants to do one thing, but feels oneself called back to do another, the power of habit was tugging deeply at his person (*Conf.* VIII.xi.26). Augustine struggled to the end of his life with the sexual urges that had plagued him throughout. So too Wilson. He had met his match in alcohol. He was unable to stop drinking, try as he might. His addiction was constantly tugging at him, causing him to break promises, disappear on alcoholic misadventures, lose jobs, injure his health, and to awake to the deep loneliness and despair that is alcoholism.

In response to his struggles with his divided will, Augustine did not persist in going after the higher good, or God, but rather the self-determining element of the will came in and further divided the will against itself. In this way the lower will began to

assume power over the higher will. According to Augustine, individuals must find ways to break free from the bad habits that have them chained to old customs, old memories, and previous ways of living. Individuals must begin to make their will over into something that strives towards the higher good, ultimately leading to a united, or integrated, will. This is not a common situation. It is far more likely that one will learn to keep one's lower will in check while simultaneously working towards the higher good. There are many factors that may keep one from total pursuit of the higher good, such as a person's life-path, or what one is willing to sacrifice in order to work towards that which is perceived to be of supreme importance in one's own life. Augustine suffered from a conflict between his willingness and his unwillingness. He desired to commit entirely to God, but he was unable to do so. This situation tormented Augustine's soul until he gave in to it and submitted himself fully to God (Kalpakgian 6).

For Augustine, his conversion came about when he overcame his divided will towards sexual desire with divine assistance in the garden in Milan. "I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled" (*Conf.* VIII.xii.29). This is the ultimate human struggle. The desire within to do one thing and the competing desire, also from within, to do another. Augustine called this disordered state of desire the state of concupiscence. This state is handed down from the original sin of Adam and Eve and it is something all human beings share. It cannot be escaped, it is something one is born with. Therefore, for Augustine, all individuals share in this sinful state, and all individuals require the grace of God in

order to overcome it.

Augustine's reflections on the divided will and original sin turned toward an analysis of desire. As human beings, individuals are drawn towards objects of beauty that are finite, and give status to temporal goods that they cannot sustain, nor deserve. According to Augustine these desires are disordered and therefore sinful in their nature. These desires leave individuals unsatisfied and unhappy. The pursuit of such items in an attempt to find happiness is doomed to failure. So long as individuals continue to look to fleeting passions and material goods in order to derive meaning from life, individuals will remain disordered. Augustine believed that humanity, not God, was responsible for the existence of evil in the world and that by turning away from God, and in his case, looking to fornication in an broad attempt to find some type of lasting happiness and meaning leaves individuals, such as himself, permanently wanting, leaving longings that cannot be fulfilled (Miller 388). The alcoholic is a similar creature, lusting after alcohol in an attempt to find some sort of happiness, some sort of purpose, but instead finding hopelessness and futility of life. The alcoholic is struggling with a desire that can never be fulfilled (AA *Alcoholics* 25).

Augustine believed that humanity was born into the state of original sin through Adam. Being the first male, head of the human race, his initial sinfulness has impacted and shaped the nature of all humanity that has proceeded from him (Couenhoven 367). This state of original sin into which humanity was born is the same state of disordered desire that all human beings share. Individuals relate to each other through their loves and desires, and sin becomes misalignment in their relationship to God, as well as to the beauty and good that is in God's creation. Original sin is similar to other sin, though

it differs in that it is shared by all, and it is an inherited condition. Fundamentally, original sin is disorientation away from the Highest Good, God, and towards the lower goods. Augustine termed this skewed orientation carnal concupiscence (Couenhoven 372). Carnal concupiscence is a desire for things that are of the flesh, forbidden, and related to the desire for sin. It is a state of disordered desire that affects the body.

Augustine continued to look at the corruptibility of the body in relation to its “burden on the soul,” stating that this is “not the cause but the punishment of Adam's first sin” (*City* XIV.3). It is here that we discover that our flesh was not able to make our souls sinful, but it was our original sinful soul that impacted our flesh to sin, and we continue to sin by virtue of our sinful human soul (*City* XIV.3). We cannot blame the Devil for that which resides within us all. Rather, according to Augustine, we carry the seeds of sin within us all, and our soul is divided due to the original sin of Adam. Augustine noted that “Scripture often refers to the whole human being by the term “flesh”, “the flesh cannot desire without the soul, so when he speaks of the flesh desiring, he means that the soul desires in a carnal manner” (Couenhoven 373). Augustine believed that it was wrong to think that sin was to be found only in the body. Sin resides in both the flesh and the soul, and sins that one recognizes as being of the flesh are actually directed from the soul that has jurisdiction over the flesh. So, carnal concupiscence becomes the disordering of the entire person and is exemplified in the distortion of desire. Though sexual desire is most frequently highlighted by Augustine in the *Confessions*, lust of any sort falls under the heading of desire. This can be greed, gluttony, power, and more. Augustine went so far as to say that though many vices are works of the flesh, the root of all evils is pride. Human pride, “man's desire to live

according to himself” (*City XIV.3*) is where the root of addiction takes hold.

In the *City of God*, Augustine referred to the writings of Paul and the Galatians. Augustine interpreted these writings by Paul as relating to “vice” or as being “a work of the flesh” (Gal 5:19-21). Augustine then expanded on this concept, stating that “in the works of the flesh which Paul said were manifest and which he enumerated and condemned [...] are vices of the soul rather than of the body” (*City XIV.2*). He continued by asking why Paul would have considered all such works of vice to be works of the flesh, and his response was “that by his figurative use of a part for the whole he wants us to interpret the word 'flesh' as meaning the whole of human nature” (*City XIV.2*). Again we are struck with the inclusiveness of all human nature as sinful. The recognition of drunkenness as vice is clearly spelled out in Galatians 5. It is a human vice, and also a work of the flesh according to Paul, and it is “pleasure of the flesh” according to Augustine (*City XIV.2*). Thus, we can tell if someone is living according to the ways of the flesh versus living in the ways of the Spirit. Drunkenness is a vice that encourages further sinful behaviours and expands the ways in which we live in the flesh. To live in the flesh is to live for the self rather than to live for God. To live in this manner is to live in a disordered way, in a state of chaos and willfulness.

According to Versfeld, Augustine holds that “wherever you find pride there you will find an inner misery and dejection, however concealed it may be” (52). This reflects much of Augustine's own background as he lived a life filled with an overabundance of food, sex, ego, competition, pursuit of wealth, all of which led to him become a man who was self-willed and ruled by pride and habit (*Conf. II.ii.2*). However, it was this background that opened Augustine up to “ponder on this paradox

'that elevation should be below, and dejection aloft'. The 'dejection' now spoken of is the subjection to the higher goods of the humble man. If pride is the root of the vices, humility is the root of the virtues" (Versfeld 53). As higher goods represent order, and lower goods represent disorder, in order to move away from vice and toward virtue, one must move away from disorder towards order. "To be humble is in short *to be in order*, in all senses of the word, and since to be in order is to be capable of action, as opposed to running round in circles, to be humble is to be capable of effective and meaningful action" (Versfeld 53). Pride, then, becomes recognized as a loss of living in an orderly fashion. Lust, which can be applied to anything, not just sexual behaviour, implies disordered relationships, and it destroys an individual's nature, ruining one's life personally and in one's community. Both pride and lust are related to disordered nature.

This is important in applying Augustine's work to addiction. When studying the *Confessions*, Augustine's life was described as one of dislocation, disorder and self-will. According to Alexander, these streams of thinking "remain a powerful influence within today's conventional wisdom on addiction and within global philosophy in general" (207). Alexander claims that "in modern times, universal dislocation is accompanied by near-universal addiction. St. Augustine's writings indicate that this was equally true in his times [...] he gave colour to his descriptions by enlisting himself and his friends as prime examples, often presenting himself as a pathetic, tearful sinner, begging God for help in overcoming his addictive sins" (209).

Augustine's struggle with his sexual compulsion was remarkably similar to those who struggle with sexual addiction today. Augustine pleads, "If only someone could have imposed restraint on my disorder" (*Conf.* II.i.3). He understood early on that

some things in his life were on the path to being out of control, as he recognized that he was seething in misery and he allowed his impulses to control his behaviours (*Conf.* II.i.4). Augustine was in the process of giving his physical senses full control over his body, his mind, and his soul. Throughout the *Confessions*, as Augustine looked back on his life, he saw how he was shaped by his experiences with concupiscence, with willing and doing, and with pride. Augustine saw these same characteristics engaging the populace that surrounded him. His society was in a state of near collapse, fractured by civil war, slavery and corruption, with many around him participating in addictive-like disordered behaviours (Alexander 208). Augustine recognized that he was held hostage by something greater than himself. “The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint” (*Conf.* VIII.v.10). These same discussions are active today. The power of the will, the force of habit, the chains of bondage, the changing of behaviours, all are issues that Augustine addressed in the *Confessions*, and they are all issues that are discussed in the program of AA today. “Thus, today's inconsistency about whether or not addiction is 'out of control' has ancient, Christian roots that are tangled in theological issues. Moreover, millennia of abstract philosophical debate concerning free will and determinism have roots in arguments that St. Augustine laid out as a way of analyzing his experience as an addict” (Alexander 211).

The behaviours that Augustine experienced in his life were much more than just

a “mistaken lifestyle choice” (Alexander 213). They expressed a much deeper theological tragedy. His pleasures of the flesh had come at the expense of a “lifelong communion with God” (Alexander 213). The experiences that Augustine documented were of his personal disorder and dislocation as well as that of the society that surrounded him. “In my own case, as I deliberated about serving my Lord God (Jer. 30:9) which I had long been disposed to do, the self which willed to serve was identical with the self which was unwilling. It was I. I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself” (*Conf.* VIII.x.22). Augustine also showed how these experiences functioned to fill a void in his life. In his early life his sexual experiences bolstered his ego, and in the grand scheme of his life they left him bereft and struggling, though at the time they were significantly powerful. Ultimately Augustine was only able to find peace and happiness by abstinence from these behaviours, though he struggled with strong cravings as long as he lived. Immediately upon freeing himself from his addictions and his conversion to a new life path of following Christianity, Augustine states, “already my mind was free of the 'biting cares' of place-seeking, of desire for gain, of wallowing in self-indulgence, of scratching the itch of lust” (*Conf.* IX.i.1).

Although Augustine's struggle was one with sexual desire, not with alcohol, it seems that he implicitly understood the fate of the addicted soul. He recognized the similarities between obsession to fleshly vices, no matter what the type. Augustine was not an alcoholic, although his reflections could be applied to anyone struggling with addiction. In his own struggle, which was primarily of a spiritual nature, of whether or

not to become a Christian, he entered the physical level in the sexual arena². Augustine dealt with psychological, behavioural, sociological, and spiritual issues. This would place him on a level with any addict who, in her addiction struggles with those very same issues, making Augustine's writings highly relevant and insightful reading. Augustine believed that the grace of God was required to heal him from his divided will, and to clear him from the obsessions of the flesh. This appears to be the same treatment required by the alcoholic who still suffers and, when applied to other vices, seems equally appropriate. For Augustine, the divided will, which is characterized by addiction, falls under the term concupiscence, his proposed solution of which is the grace of God.

If, as Augustine proposes, we all suffer from a divided will, making this an inescapable human condition, it also means that on some level the struggle with addiction is then something that every individual undergoes. This means that the reconciliation of the divided will in order to heal the disordered, broken, chaotic human soul becomes the ultimate goal. The addicted soul searching for healing represents those who are trying to be something other than what they are, something better or different than they currently are, and that requires something greater than themselves in order to bring it about. This moves the matter of healing from the realms of science into the realm of the spiritual, as Augustine was well aware from personal experience. It also encompasses the nature of the battle itself. For the human will, separated as it is from God in its division of the will, in its limitations of ability, requires assistance from

2 The program Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) is a Twelve Step Program that grew out of Alcoholics Anonymous and is known as the Augustinian Fellowship, as its members saw many of their symptoms shared with Augustine, and described in *Confessions*.

that same God in order to move towards healing and freedom. “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (*Conf.* 1.1).

Historically, the Christian Church was involved in matters dealing with societal vice. It provided a foundation from which to approach the problems generated through such vice and made attempts to assist with physical healing and aid in the reconciliation of severed relationships. The Christian Church is involved with the betterment of the basic universal human condition and addiction is a reflection of that condition. More often we see churches making themselves available to the Twelve Step Recovery Programs in an attempt to better the human condition and further spiritual healing. Augustine recognized the broad underlying connection between addiction and the human condition, though he never put the term of addiction to it. His writings were set out for the masses, not only for the literati alone. In Augustine's humanness there was a connection between himself and the “everyman” and this has been part of the enduring nature of his works. Augustine understood that individuals have the capability to be self-reflective and to desire change, but also to undergo a rebellion towards that change leaving them incapable of change.

Augustine recognized vice as emerging from the weakness of the flesh. He did not distinguish one vice as being morally worse from any other. He did recognize that vice goes against the glory of God. In this same way, all individuals may recognize areas of their own lives where they have particular weakness, where they might identify with the subjective experience of addiction, but it does not make them an addicted soul *per se*. However, as all share in the weakness of the flesh, no one is morally superior to the other.

In the propositions held by Augustine, we see the need for the Spirit. Inherent in his experiences Augustine came face to face with the integral understanding that he could not will himself out of the enslavement that had him bound. Augustine based his recovery on the grace of God as a pure and righteous gift. In order to break the bonds of slavery, he recognized that he required a spiritual relationship. There was no way to wholeness without it. Successful recovery from addiction today in the program of AA also requires a spiritual connection (*AA Alcoholics* 25). Augustine understood that our human frailties, our internal divisions of self and will, can only be overcome with faith, grace, and the power of God. Augustine's struggle took him to the door of grace as a means of finding wholeness and freedom.

The program of AA, and Augustine's divided will, have similarities. The concept of the divided will is readily seen in the alcoholic newcomer whose life is deemed chaotic, or out of control. The alcoholics inability to make his body and mind unified in order that he does what he wills, is similar to what Augustine described as the situations that befell him. "In the agony of hesitation I made many physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something and lack the strength, either because they lack the actual limbs or because their limbs are fettered with chains or weak with sickness [...] for as soon as I had the will, I would have had a wholehearted will [...] nevertheless it did not happen" (*Conf.* VIII.viii.20). The ordering of the mind, brought about through surrender, brings about a calm, a serenity. "We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall from us. We begin to feel the nearness of our Creator" (*AA Alcoholics* 75). Echoing these sentiments, Augustine recognized his anger, made his penance in the offering of the

totality of his life to God, and began to feel gladness and delight. Renewal of his character was happening (*Conf.* IX.iv.10). The relationship between AA and Augustine are clear and direct.

Chapter 6

Augustine on Concupiscence

Continuing the study of Augustine and his relationship to addiction brings about the need to further explore unrestricted desire, or concupiscence. At its core, concupiscence is the desire within to do one thing and the competing desire, also from within, to do another. Augustine referred to this as a disordered state of desire. Augustine wrote about concupiscence in both *Confessions* and *City of God*. He recognized that disordered passion could have effects on both the individual and society at large. Though concupiscence did not have to be evil, as when it is issued as desire for wisdom or the Spirit, in *Confessions* and *City of God* where Augustine was referring to disordered desire, he recognized it as carnal, or fleshly concupiscence, meaning sinful.

There are two designations of concupiscence expressed in the *City of God*, that of the “flesh” and that of the “spirit.” Distinguishing between these two terms brings one to an understanding that the impetus of desire is vital. Desire according to the “flesh” is rebellious and therefore cannot be oriented towards the *summum bonum* (Weidenaar 53). Augustine gives as an example that there was a “chain of habit” that had him bound: “because my will was perverse, it changed to lust” (*Conf.* VIII.v.10), confirming that the impetus of his will being immoral changed the outcome of his attraction from love to lust, and that his behaviour was a repetitive one, one that was habitual. Augustine stressed that concupiscence takes place in the will. He also related

concupiscence to sexual pleasure, as this was the arena in which his obsession held sway over him. In extrapolating his writings to a broader view of addiction, the realm of desire is one that is behind all addictive impulses and behaviours, and the study of concupiscence brings us to the heart of both the work of Augustine and also that of addiction.

The *City of God* is a story about two cities, each filled with opposing types of individuals. The one city is filled with individuals who live according to the flesh, the other those who live according to the Spirit. Each city ends up living the lifestyle they have chosen, along with the peace or chaos that accompanies it (City XIV.1). The two designations, of the flesh and of the Spirit, are distinctly different. The category of “flesh” is not to be solely equated with the physical body. It is, however, a state of a fallen man being in rebellion to God, and it is a state of sinfulness that is reflected in human nature, not simply in our fleshly body (Weidenaar 53). Augustine equated sin with matters of the flesh. He also perceived sin as a matter of the soul's shifting away from God and towards things of the world.

Augustine drew from the writings of Paul to the Galatians regarding what it meant to live in the flesh, and that such living was sinful, even though by its nature flesh is not evil. It is by its actions that flesh becomes sinful: it arises in the will, in the allowing of the will to do as it wills, without concern for God. Augustine quoted Paul with a list of carnal pleasures: immorality, uncleanness, licentiousness, drunkenness, carousings. He continued with a list of vices, not necessarily related to the gratification of the body, and made the distinction that they were vices of the soul, for they were not of the physical flesh, yet the body participates in them. “It is clear enough to everyone

that idolatry, [...] jealousies, anger, quarrels, factions, parties, envies are vices of the soul rather than of the body” (*City* XIV.2). Here Augustine made claim that these vices are those of the mind and that the mind is a part of the flesh, leading us into temptation, leading us to sin. He proposed that Paul's reason for including all listed vices as those of the flesh was that Paul wanted the world to understand that the word flesh is figurative for all of humanity (*City* XIV.2).

Augustine then began to address the burden of the sinful soul that he attached to Adam and Eve. For Augustine, the corruption of the body, that takes place through sin and is a blight on the soul, is the punishment of the first sin of Adam. Augustine believed that it was not our corrupted flesh that made our soul sinful, but our corrupted soul that made our flesh sinful. Since the first sin of Adam, our souls have been corrupted and our sinful flesh has been the result (*City* XIV.3). The first body was made perfect by God. It became sinful because of the mind that led it to sin through the temptation of the Devil on the mind. To call the body sinful would be to claim that the Creator had created something that was flawed in the beginning. This Augustine could not tolerate. Rather, Adam and Eve's will and passions were misaligned, were disordered, in allowing their mind to rule their body. Divided in their will, their passions had been allowed to assume control. Augustine believed that Adam and Eve were without the defect of the disordered will prior to their being thrown from the Garden of Eden, and it was this disordered will that had subsequently been passed on to all humanity ever since (Weidenaar 56). And so, the hardest of all facts is that for Adam and Eve, and all who followed after them, “this just punishment involves many consequences. Man who was destined to become spiritual even in his flesh, if only he

kept the commandment, became, instead, fleshly even in his soul” (Weidenaar 57).

Sinfulness came about through the Devil. Augustine stated, “not by reason of the flesh [...] but by reason of a man's desire to live according to himself [...] made [man] like the Devil. For the Devil wished to live according to himself when he did not abide in the truth. So that, when he told a lie, it was not of God's doing but of his own, for the Devil [...] was the first liar. Lying began with him, as all sin began with him” (*City* XIV.3). Even though many times the flesh appeared weak, Augustine was convinced that the flesh was not responsible for sin. The root of sin was with the Devil, and it was from him that individual's divided will was born. Though it would have been convenient to attribute to the flesh full responsibility for evil in humanity, according to Augustine it was not so. The Devil was responsible for unrestricted passions, and as human beings we must not live according to the Devil, but according to God (*City* XIV.4). Individuals must not live according to carnal concupiscence, according to their own selves, or to human ways, for when they do they are living a lie (*City* XIV.4). The entrance of sin into the world was not because of the fleshly body. It was because of the sin that grew from the misalignment of the will and passion. It came about by the soul's desire for self-will.

Human beings were created by God to glorify Him. Man was not created in sin, but in truth and perfection. Man was not meant to live according to himself, or for himself and for his own desires, but was meant to live for God, to do the will of God. Augustine states in the *City of God*, that though man desires happiness, he does not live in such a way as to make happiness possible, and therefore this desire is a lie. The only way to obtain happiness is from God, and therefore to live for oneself is sinful, and to

be sinful is to lose God (XIV.4). And yet, man continues to be swayed by desire, willing to do that which the internal will desires, even when it is in opposition to that which God does want. This places their desires in a position of loftiness, of being superior to those which God desires. In this way individuals are not living according to the will of God but according to the ways of men, making themselves into super beings who see themselves as gods, individuals who are above God, who make the rules and allow themselves to be swayed by rebellious passion (*City* XIV.4). Consequently, we must accept that God is blameless and that we are responsible for our own wanderings into sin. We must not blame our sinfulness and our defects of character on our fleshly nature, for we were created by God, and this would criticize Him. Our individual flesh is good and ordered. Where things become sinful is when we chase after appointed goods, abandoning all that is good about the Creator, and living sinfully according to the flesh or the soul (*City* XIV.5).

The thrust behind one's actions are an important piece of the concupiscence puzzle. What drives individuals to act the way they do, to live in rebelliousness and chaos, or in peace and harmony, is the will behind the individual actions (Maté 109). We see this also in the *City of God*. Augustine stresses that concupiscence takes place in the will. It is birthed in the soul. "Man's will, then, is all-important. If it is badly directed, the emotions will be perverse; if it is rightly directed, the emotions will be not merely blameless but even praiseworthy [...] for, what are desire and joy but the will in harmony with things we desire?" (*City* XIV.6). Augustine relates concupiscence to sexual pleasure. He does not believe that it is the pleasure that makes the sexual act wrong, it is the disorder that is created in the will that makes the sexual act wrong. The

disorder shows itself when lust, or spontaneity, or when the power and control that is exhibited when it is outside of the rightly ordered love of God, take over the sexual act. In this way Augustine considers the desire for sexual pleasure to be identical with concupiscence that is called sin and that turns individuals away from the love of God (Weidenaar 61). In the *Confessions*, the sinfulness of Augustine's early life is described as concupiscence: "Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness" (II.ii.2). It shows that it was the force behind the behaviour, as well as the behaviour itself, that qualified as disordered will or disordered desire. Augustine referred to the confusion he encountered when facing two things that were boiling up inside of him. These incredible urges of desire were rolling over him, threatening to submerge him in a vortex of lust (*Conf.* II.ii.2). Augustine struggled with sexual immorality throughout his life, up until the time of his conversion, after which the obsession was lifted. The language he uses is typical of addiction and recovery, as we hear him talk about the control the behaviour has on his person, and his inability to escape it physically or mentally. After his conversion in *Confessions*, Augustine stated that his heart had been pierced with the arrow of God's love and that God's words had transfixed his innermost being. In this way Augustine's deep lassitude was destroyed and he was precluded from being dragged down to fleshly things (XIII.ii.3).

The writings of Paul, particularly Romans 7:13-25, held great sway over Augustine after his conversion, though he may have interpreted them differently than Paul intended. These words echoed his own struggle with the division of the will. "But

I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me” (Rom 7:23). Augustine understood that in our human condition the division of the will applied to us all, and that we were all pushed and pulled by the desire that was within us. It was not just carnal concupiscence, but all vice that had the ability to make individuals behave in ways they did not want to behave and to do the things they did not want to do. Augustine stressed that in the case of the will, its choice can only be truly free when it is not enslaved to sin and vice. This freedom comes through God the Saviour, the Liberator (*City XIV.11*).

Augustine recognizes that desire is punishment for both original sin and also for the continued ways in which man lives according to the will of man. “This just punishment involves many consequences. Man who was destined to become spiritual even in his flesh, if only he had kept the commandment, became, instead, fleshly even in his soul” (*City XIV.15*). This leaves man vulnerable to sin, to the power of the divided will as a source of influence, directing him for the remainder of his days, to tormenting him and keeping him from freedom. Augustine states that man had pleased himself by pride, and was then abandoned to his own weakness. Man had chained himself to the misery of servitude in place of the freedom he longed for, having freely chosen the death of his soul, he would also experience the death of his body, and nothing could save him but grace (*City XIV.15*).

As Augustine approaches the discussion of lust, he also approaches the discussion of addiction. For him, lust was not singled out as the only addictive sin, even though from today's perspective it was the addictive sin that he struggled with. Augustine recognized other vices, he simply did not write about them in the same way

as he addressed sexual concupiscence. We must attempt to apply his writings to those other areas. As we look to the *City of God*, his commentary regarding sexual vice seems to be fluid enough to apply to other addictions. Augustine believed that because we refused to be obedient to God with our will and our body, where we used to be obedient, we were now insubordinated by our will and our body (*City* XIV.15). We had given control to our will and our body, that knew no limits. The description of insubordination by the body applies with equal measure to the struggle with alcoholism. There comes a time when the body no longer recognizes the commands of the mind. The mind has become insubordinate to the body by addiction. “Pain of body is simply suffering of soul arising from the body; it is, as it were, the soul's disapproval of what is happening to the body, much as the anguish of spirit which is called sorrow is a disapproval of what is happening in opposition to our wills” (*City* XIV.15). In this way, the addicted person is numbing the body due to spiritual pain. The division of the will that began in the soul has taken hold of the flesh.

Augustine goes on to state with regards to sexual vice, “bodily pleasure, however, is preceded by a kind of appetite, a sensation in the flesh corresponding to desire in the soul, familiar in the form of hunger and thirst, and commonly called *libido* when connected with sex - although, strictly speaking, lust is a word applicable to any kind of appetite, as in the classical definition of anger as a lust for revenge” (*City* XIV.15). This “appetite” he recognizes as being applicable to any vice, therefore applicable to drunkenness as well. He continues that there are many kinds of lust, not just physical lust. Though sexual lust does not just invade the physical body and its outward members, it takes complete and total control of the entire individual, bodily

and emotionally, and what results is an absolute paralysis of judgment while pleasurable sensations run rampant (*City* XIV.16). This is equally applicable to the addict on an alcoholic binge who is unable to cease with the behaviours in their search for that ultimate peak experience, no matter to what degree they are harming themselves. They are on a mission to find that experience, and, once having experienced it, they return to it again and again in order to try to repeat the performance. The forming of an appetite for any vice is thus the beginning of addiction. The appetite begins gently, but takes hold of the body and grows over time, forming attachments. Addiction attaches desire, enslaving the power of desire to specific people, behaviours, and things. These objects of attachment then become obsessions and preoccupations; they come to control our lives (May 3).

To escape from these bonds, these chains of desire and habit, is a paradox. Addiction has bred in us a willfulness that has run without controls, and at the same time, has eroded our free will. Our will has been divided, surely, and we have been left as idolaters in the face of God, chasing after that which will never satisfy the void within. We have made our vices and objects of our desire our gods. We have come to worship them. “We had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help” (AA *Alcoholics* 25). And so it becomes clear to those who struggle with vice turned to addiction, help is needed in order to recover. It cannot be done alone. It is through the process of looking at oneself, in the face of addiction, that the pathway to recovery becomes clear to Augustine and others. Only the beneficence of God, or grace, can lead a path out of the dilemma. Addiction, and rock

bottom, can be the turning point for many individuals. It can be the moment where a new relationship is struck with the God of our understanding. The turning over of an individual's will to a Higher Power is the breaking point of concupiscence. These are the moments that lead us to an appreciation of the grace of God. Augustine acknowledged how unmerited and undeserved the grace is that delivered him from the fate that had held him tight. He saw clearly the contrast between his freedom and the punishment of those who surrounded him, those whose punishment by rights he should be sharing (*City XIV.26*). The effects of the divided will, of desire run rampant with no limitations, has shaped the individual in such a way that, through pride and self-will, there has been a severing of the relationship with God. It is an individual's stubbornness and reliance upon her own will that has led her to fall from the favour of divine grace. This is a personal choice (*City XIV.27*). In order to repair these damaged relationships, and return to rightly ordered will and passion towards God, human beings must make the journey to God and request a return to right relationship, to forgiveness, to a state of grace. For God preferred to leave the decision up to the individual, to let the individual make her own choices. In this way, God shows what immense suffering flows from a creature's pride and what incredible good comes from the grace of God (*City XIV.27*). In this way, showing an affirmation of God's omnipotence and a movement away from the qualities of addiction, the latter is reliant upon God, and the other boasts that it will make its way on its own (*City XIV.28*).

Chapter 7

Spiritual Transformation

Having explored the history of AA and its founders, and the Christian history behind the program and principles of AA, it is structurally important that an examination of the element that distinguishes AA from other recovery programs is elaborated. This is the principle of a spiritual awakening as is described in Step Twelve of the AA program; “having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (AA *Alcoholics* 59).

There are many distinguishing features of spiritual transformations, but the bottom line according to White, is that “experiences measured in moments can forever rend a life into the temporal categories of before and after and leave in their psychological wake an essentially new person” (461). Further, Rambo states that these experiences are also differentiated between “*process* [and] *event* ...[as] contrary to popular mythology, conversion is very rarely an overnight, all-in-an-instant, wholesale transformation that is now and forever” (1). In the AA program, this is a recognized fact. Certain individuals have instantaneous transformative experiences, but, for the majority of followers, it will be a process event requiring time and personal effort. There are, however, a recognized sequence of events that the majority of AA members will experience on their way to spiritual awakening. They begin with hitting rock bottom and a recognition that they are unable to control their problems. A feeling of

sorrow follows, implying not only contrition for their present state, but also a deep desire for a new way. The final step is the act of surrendering one's will to the God of one's understanding, or a Higher Power. Rambo described these steps as an extenuating personal crisis; an utter defeat and breakthrough experience; and a distinctly changed identity and life path. However, a religious conversion contains more than simply those elements. It is also one of humanity's ways of solving or resolving the mystery of destiny, meaning, and human origins (Rambo 2).

The individuals we have examined to this point and time, Paul, Augustine, and Wilson, have all experienced transformational spiritual experiences. These experiences were defining points in their lives and followed the traditional stages of transformation as laid out by AA and Rambo. Though none had exactly the same elements in common, all of their conversion experiences were life changing. In the cases of these three individuals, all went on to impact a significant number of individuals, sharing their experiences of spiritual awakening for the remainder of their lives.

The transformational change experience of Saul, on the road to Damascus, that transformed him into St. Paul the Christian apostle, contained the core elements of what is included in a conversion experience, as he experienced deep personal crisis, complete defeat, and then, days later an experience that would lift him up from despair. His transformational experience was accompanied by bright flashing lights and a voice from heaven. Paul's spiritual awakening was an event. It took place at a specific time and location and left him irrevocably changed (Acts 9).

The spiritual awakening of Augustine was both a process and an event. He had spent years searching for answers to his deep questioning, exploring philosophical

sources in his desire for knowledge about Truth. In *Confessions*, Augustine looked back over his life and stopped to analyze significant events that had shaped his life. What he recognized was that there was a long-term curiosity regarding God, but also an inability to commit to that way of life, for fear of having to give up his lusts and the things that held him bound by habit. These things were disheartening to Augustine, for they controlled him. Augustine was held fast by fleshly desires and he was not prepared to give them up, even though he felt a calling, a tugging at his heart strings for change. After many years of this struggle, his transformation came suddenly, in the garden, where he said “at once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled (*Conf.* XIII.xii.29). Augustine had accepted change. He had turned his life over to God, and he never looked back. The remainder of his life was spent in pursuit of things holy, rising in the Church ranks to become Bishop of Hippo.

Wilson's spiritual awakening was also an event. He had lived his life for many years as a disappointing alcoholic, one who could not tell the truth, one who could not hold down a job, one who was an embarrassment to himself and others. Wilson had gotten to the stage of alcoholism whereby the next step would be institutionalization due to one or more of the common illnesses associated with alcoholism: delirium tremens, wet brain, or psychosis (*AA Alcoholics* 7). His family proceeded to admit him to a long-term alcohol treatment facility where he lay in bed, in great distress. A feeling of sorrow about his life, for having let down his family was overwhelming to him, and Wilson deeply wanted to find a new way to live. He then pronounced “if there be a God, let him show Himself!” Wilson's room was set ablaze with a bright white light

and he was filled from the inside out with ecstasy beyond description (*AA Pass* 120-121). He instantly underwent a conversion experience that was to mark the remainder of his life. He felt that at that moment his mind was opened to all of the Power of the Universe, to visions and dreams that went beyond anything he had ever experienced. From that moment on he never looked back, except to make restitution and to use the past as experience for the benefit of newcomers. He then went on to co-create the most significant mutual-aid fellowship assisting those who suffer from alcoholism, AA. This spiritual awakening experience he underwent, and that committed AA program followers also undergo, be it sometimes instantaneously and sometimes auspiciously slowly, is one that distinguishes the program of AA from other “treatment-like” programs.

James presents to us a passage that accounts for all three core elements of conversion as experienced by Paul, Augustine, and Wilson. Firstly, one must experience natural despair and agony and then also experience the miraculous release from those conditions. The sense that the experience is a miracle and not one of a natural occurrence is important. Voices, lights, visions, and a sense that one has surrendered one's personal will to a Higher Power, are often a part of the experience. Finally, one experiences a sense of safety, rightness, cleanness, and a nature that is filled with jubilation and a knowing that one has been bestowed with a radically altered nature (James 185). This passage very neatly parallels the experience that all three men personally underwent. We see the description of an extenuating personal crisis, an utter defeat and breakthrough experience, and a distinctly changed identity and life path.

In AA, the spiritual awakening that is promised is not necessarily of the

religious sort. Many people do however, have a religious conversion in addition to their spiritual awakening while actively working in the program of AA. Rambo continues to expand the definition of conversion, and in its expansion it begins to parallel the understanding of the spiritual conversion that the program of AA is promoting in the lives of its membership. He states that the spiritual transformation will change one from seeing everything connected to this world as evil, to seeing all the world and creation as an expression of God's power and love. Individuals will change from solely seeking personal gratification, to that of seeking to help and share with others. They will shift from being selfishly oriented toward their own welfare exclusively, and will take a broader perspective wanting shared justice for all (Rambo 2). Spiritual awakening results in an opening of the spirit toward others, a change in orientation from self to others. AA states, in what they refer to as the “promises” that for the alcoholic who undergoes a spiritual awakening he “will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in [his] fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. [His] whole attitude and outlook on life will change” (AA *Alcoholics* 84).

Claytor states that the relationship that alcoholics have with their alcohol is very much a spiritual one. Alcohol has been their friend, it has been their lover, it has been there, by their side, and has never let them down – that is, until the day that it began to let them down. The alcoholic developed a relationship with alcohol. This relationship was positive. It was one that was based on underlying trust that proved itself more and more often as each new experience proved that alcohol would do exactly what the individual needed it to do for him, every time. This experience built on each successive experience, and it was consolidated, with the result being that the alcoholic developed a

deeply integrated relationship with alcohol that would last for the remainder of his life (Claytor 32). The relationship that the alcoholic has with his drink is one that produces a spiritual yearning. Until the spiritual yearning for alcohol within the alcoholic is replaced by another equally powerful but differing yearning, no amount of behavioural modification or will power will produce enduring or gratifying sobriety. Spiritual awakening is the replacement of alcohol for the alcoholic and becomes the compelling new yearning in AA (Claytor 33). In this way, breaking free from the spiritual relationship to alcohol and replacing it with a stronger, more powerful spiritual relationship is the saving grace for many alcoholics. It fills the spiritual void that lurks within in a powerful and positive manner.

In designing the program of AA, the work of William James' had an enormous effect on Wilson (*AA Pass* 124). We can see the seeds of the spiritual awakening that the AA program refers to in Step Twelve, and also how Wilson would have had his own spiritual experience reaffirmed by the reading of this text. In his section on conversion, James recognized that every man had the potential for a spiritual conversion. Deep down inside each individual is a place that can be touched by conversion. James believed that individuals have a central core of personal energy where the thoughts and beliefs that one commits to live in one's consciousness. As individuals move toward spiritual awakening, thoughts and beliefs that were peripheral begin to take a central stage. In the process of this awakening, in this state of change, these thoughts, beliefs, and emotions have a tendency to explode within individuals, leaving them far different from what they were (James 164). This was absolutely true for Wilson. His idea of God became central in his life, and he was a changed man. As he and Smith worked out the

details of the AA program, the spiritual awakening became one of the first and strongest tenets of the program; one must have a Higher Power, and must make it the centre around which all of life revolves. Wilson and Smith also recognized that the power of a spiritual awakening experience is transient. It needs to be reinforced regularly, or it will begin to fade. Even individuals with profoundly compelling spiritual awakenings will begin to lose it if they begin to isolate. Attending AA meetings helps to keep the experienced miracle fresh. Newcomers and experienced members alike are encouraged to keep attending meetings in order to reinforce the message of AA and the unity that comes through the membership of the new community. They are also told to bring the body to meetings, that given enough exposure, the mind will follow along (Claytor 35).

The spiritual awakening experience undergone by Wilson was not the norm. It was a rarity. There is a recognition that such sudden conversion is a miraculous experience, an event, and that the norm is a process requiring time. James referred to these two types of transformation experiences as the volitional type and the self-surrender type. In the volitional type, the process is gradual, taking time to build up a complete new set of spiritual and moral habits. In the self-surrender type, the individual must allow the Higher Power that has been rising up in his inner being to finish the work it has begun. The individual must yield to this Power and turn his life over, thereby creating a new personality. This happens as an event, where what had been previously viewed objectively is now taken within and assimilated (James 172). Both types of awakenings are stimulated by psychological turmoil. Thus, we see that spiritual awakening experiences are often preceded by conflict, anguish, despair, guilt, and other similar difficulties (Rambo 9). These emotions are part of the extenuating

personal crisis that leads the individual to a place of utter and total defeat. This is a personal benchmark for each individual and cannot be determined by anyone else. No one else can determine when “rock bottom” has been reached. At this point there are but two things going on in the mind of any candidate for a spiritual awakening: first, the wrongness or incompleteness that the individual is experiencing, the personal sin that they are hopeful to escape from; and second, the new and positive life that they wish to embrace (James 171).

This moment of crisis is one that takes the person up to the point of change, or turning point. For example, in terms of the alcoholic, or the person who still suffers, he is looking for freedom from pain, freedom from a past that is full of chaos. According to Rambo, in terms of this crisis, it is helpful to think in terms of religious transcendence. There is a desire to experience a Higher Power, God, on that journey toward freedom. This often brings individuals to a place of conversion because they have a desire to try something new, and they are seeking an alternative in the midst of chaos (Rambo 50-51). Conversion is a mental process that much of the current psychological literature presents along with the crisis involved, as a breakdown or a debility. From this perspective, the motivating factor to convert is derived from an inadequacy generated out of loneliness, fear, or desperation, and the actual conversion itself is seen as the mechanism that endeavours to resolve psychological conflict (Rambo 52). Crisis provides the individuals with a completely new opportunity. Their life experiences are triggering a search for new possibilities. The crisis may be the catalyst for change or it may be an incident in a line of incidents that are emblematic of the person's situation.

An additional understanding of crisis is that of James, who suggested that individuals would throw themselves upon the mercy of powers that are greater than themselves, powers that make for their personal redemption in a state of crisis. This moment of self-surrender is not only the vital turning-point but is also the actual moment of crisis (James 172). The concept of self-surrender is one we see expressed in the Step One of AA: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and our lives had become unmanageable”. The individual is carrying a load of unresolved life issues that they wish to resolve. They are suffering from worry, anger, fear, and despair, as well as a host of other issues. In order to be rid of these feelings that have a tendency to overwhelm, many individuals simply quit, they stop. They give up on the struggle, with the current crisis, and return to a previous state of being. This return is common in the chaos of a life that has been ruled by alcoholism, where the situation is totally unmanageable. It is common that one returns to familiar feelings instead of pushing forward and trying something new while in the midst of chaos. It can be a cycle until true rock bottom has been reached and the individual is then ready to self-surrender, to give up one's will, in order that a Higher Power can take control. This is the true moment of crisis. These understandings of crisis apply equally well to both a religious conversion as well as an AA spiritual awakening. Once the moment of crisis has passed and conversion has been undergone, the time of real changed identity and life path are underway. In AA this is done by completing Steps Four through Twelve. Or perhaps by completing all Twelve Steps and having had a slow, volitional type, spiritual awakening. No matter the speed with which it has been accomplished, the result is the same, change has been wrought.

After undergoing a spiritual awakening, individuals look towards significant numbers of experiences in their lives. According to Rambo, individuals seek to make meaning from their lives. They look to avoid inconsistency in their lives, and they attempt to apply new structure to their lives. Having been living under abnormal or crisis circumstances this search for meaning becomes compelling; people actively search for opportunities to grow and develop, to “fill the void,” to resolve problems, to make friends, or ways to enrich life. This is an ongoing process, but one that will greatly intensify after a conversion experience (Rambo 56). It is also likely that the individual will seek to reaffirm the experience immediately following the initial conversion experience. During the initial experience itself, the individual may have felt as if they were watching from above, a spectator to the event. They know that the event took place. They are not doubting that. And now, in combination with personal experience and the power of grace, the individual concludes that the spirit of God has been with them, and has changed them in a spectacularly miraculous fashion. This experience is unlike any other that has happened in their lives, and there is an unshakable belief that a completely new nature has been breathed into them. They have become merged with the very matter of God (James 184).

The consequences of spiritual awakenings among members of AA have been staggering. Lives have been recovered, renewed, reborn. Galanter et al look to make relationships between religious conversion and the conversion experience as it takes place in AA. In the AA Big Book, there are many first-person accounts of individuals who describe that prior to, and following, their spiritual awakening they experienced intense affect. Similarly, individuals who underwent religious conversion have long

described that they too have had distinct changes in outlook and attitude related to intense affect (Galanter 331). Affect theory is that there is a non-verbal method of conveying feelings, and that individuals who have undergone similar experiences are able to share them non-verbally, almost as if it is contagious, or simply understood. To put what has occurred into words is elusive. It resists expression. No account of its contents can be adequately given verbally. It cannot be imparted or bestowed upon others, such that the spiritual experience is something that only those who have gone through it can truly comprehend it (Galanter 333). They attempt to connect through the open sharing portion of the meetings, and they do so with occasional head nodding, encouraging body language, and with big knowing smiles (Claytor 34). After a spiritual awakening an addict is simply more aware, they understand more about the realities of the alcoholic world. Simple words such as “the first drink gets you drunk” or “came to believe” deepen in meaning. These illuminations take on new significance. They become unifying forces, indicating that individuals are not alone. They have a shared understanding and a shared purpose. Throughout these exchanges the spiritual awakening remains passive. It has much more to do with being understood and transformed while in the community of others, who have been in a similar state, than it does about trying to change oneself (Claytor 35). There is an understanding, however, that their wills have been taken in by a more superior force, by a Higher Power. As long as this relationship remains secure, the passions of alcohol remain at bay, and recovery will remain in place (Claytor 35).

When members of AA are asked to share their stories, with another group or at a celebration, they refer to it as sharing their “experience, strength, and hope”, or “what it

was like, what happened, and what it's like now.” These phrases refer to the the personal crisis undergone by the individual, the utter defeat leading to the breakthrough or conversion experience, and the changed identity and new life path subsequent to the conversion. While the process of change may come quickly or slowly, the implementation of that change will take a lifetime.

The process of healing through the use of grace is often considered a precious gift. This is where God's grace reaches deep down inside of a person. This process takes time. Individuals are gently changed in a process though challenging, brings great hope (McDonough 50). The program of AA invites the recovering alcoholic into a membership that operates on a daily basis, and one that is devoted to recovery, for oneself and others. The process of recovering from alcoholism is one that takes a lifetime. It is a state whereby one alcoholic helps another alcoholic on their journey of being loved back by God into wholeness (McDonough 50). The distinction between the alienation one experienced prior to the conversion experience, and the sense of belonging and hopefulness one feels following the conversion experience, make the commitment to a lifelong process of recovery both tenable and exciting.

Chapter 8

The Search for Meaning

Aside from looking to the past of the program of AA, through its founders, its program and its principles, including its spiritual principles, it is important to begin looking toward the future of the program. Individuals who have come through the program are now facing the detritus of a failed life, with a particularly difficult road ahead of them. They have accepted a new path, but there is a requirement to somehow embrace the past and learn to make new meaning from it and their lives. Where alcoholism had been an attempt to give life meaning prior to their spiritual awakening, new methods and understandings will have to subsequently be put into place. Twelve Step Programs assist people in moving through the fear and anxiety they face, and provide individuals with the resources they need to embrace their new life situation. The interval post-spiritual awakening is often deemed to be a crisis of identity, when individuals have determined that they will be living a new life, just not certain what that new life will constitute (Minnick 3).

The crisis of identity, or existential dilemma, that individuals undergo while in the program of AA has been referred to by Viktor Frankl. He asserts that many individuals lack the awareness of a purpose worth living for. They are troubled by their experience of an inner emptiness, an inner void, which Frankl referred to as an existential vacuum (Frankl *Man's* 105). Two of the root causes of existential vacuum are social dislocation and meaninglessness (Wong 1). These lead to an existential crisis.

Additional related aspects connected to the existential crisis are alienation, sickness, suffering, despair, boredom, stress, and fear of death (Wong 2). Addiction is a self-destructive coping mechanism to avoid the inner pain that results from existential crisis. In order to have effective treatment, individuals must learn to rise above their circumstances, and overcome that which was preventing their growth. They must discover a clear sense of purpose and meaning (Wong 4). Living in an era of disintegrating traditions and collapsing social structures, the values that once supported people are being replaced by unique meanings they no longer understand. Ever more people are caught in a web of emptiness and aimlessness that permeates the modern world (Frankl *Will* 64). This position is painful and uncomfortable, and leaves individuals struggling to make meaning of their lives.

This existentialism that Frankl refers to is not the existentialism referred to by Heidegger or Sartre. Frankl stated, “human beings are transcending themselves toward meanings which are something other than themselves, which are more than mere expressions of their selves, more than mere projections of these selves. Meanings are discovered but not invented” (*Will* 60). This is contrary to the assertion of Jean-Paul Sartre, “that ideals and values are designed and invented by man. Or, that [...] man invents himself” (Frankl *Will* 60). In the struggle of addiction, and recovery from addiction, human beings are required to transcend themselves, to break with who they were in the past, and move into a brand new future, one that will make meaning as they go along. They cannot invent the meaning, but they will discover the meaning given time and opportunity. As they move further into recovery, and begin to work programs such as the Twelve Step Program of AA, life will take on these new meanings,

including spiritual values, moral values, and identity, as a part of their recovery.

Alcoholism is a problem faced by millions of North Americans. Many of them turn to AA to assist them in resolving their problems. Alcoholism is a disease of the individual and their emotions (Minnick 5), and as such is understood as a problem of body, spirit, and mind, and is a hindrance to the solving of existential dilemmas (Gregoire 340). Every time an alcoholic drinks, they are altering their consciousness in an attempt to change their beings, and they find that the world reacts negatively to them (Minnick 5). Our current culture looks to outside substances to provide meaning for life, and often individuals are totally out of touch with the power that resides within themselves (Gregoire 348). Alcoholism is a disease that embraces the whole of a person where alcohol is used to meet one's emotional, social, and psychological needs. Paradoxically, as the use of alcohol increases, the ability to function in the world without alcohol sharply decreases, as the primary relationship of the alcoholic is with alcohol, not one's community or one's world. This relationship with alcohol thus defines the alcoholic, and provides meaning to one's life, eventually becoming all-consuming. As misdirected and fleeting as it is, the addiction to alcohol is what provides the addicted alcoholic with a sense of meaning, wholeness, and fulfillment. Jung described the craving for alcohol as the "equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God" (AA *Grapevine*). Minnick also stated that AA provides a structure of spiritual values to replace a mistaken search for wholeness in alcohol (6).

The schools of thought in the fields of medicine and religion have a tendency to minimize the addicted experience and to deny the value of the meaning of addiction in

an individual's life (Gregoire 349). The program of AA takes a different stance. The addict learns that they themselves are the root cause of their misery, and that their only hope is in turning their lives over to the care of a Higher Power. AA gave individuals a way of making sense of their lives by allowing them to understand their experiences in light of a spiritual framework. This enabled the reconstruction of a new moral identity. AA stressed that a total transformation of attitude and character was needed for recovery (Minnick 20). In AA it was during this process of transformation where one learned to make meaning. For the addicted individual has come to AA deeply flawed, lacking what it took to belong in society. When one was addicted to alcohol, one's commitment was to alcohol first, not to one's family, to one's job, or to society. Alcohol became the basis of one's personal meaning (Gregoire 350). The individual gave alcohol great power in their lives. It allowed them to transcend their lives, even if only briefly. They rode alcohol to power and greatness, becoming the persons they always wanted to be, even if only for a moment. Alcohol allowed individuals to deny the reality of the life they were living. It allowed them to run from the problems they had created, and to deceive themselves about the impact of alcohol on their lives. Alcohol's ability to numb one's feelings served to separate them from their existential crises (Gregoire 350). It becomes clear that when one runs from oneself, one is able to avoid the confrontation with the internal void in the self, and this flight, this removal of the self, is a defense mechanism, an individual's attempt to run from the confrontation with the existential vacuum (Frankl *Will* 97).

The early days of alcohol abuse are very different from the latter days. Any recovering alcoholic will share with you that the end of their drinking days are totally

centred around trying to recapture those sensations from the early days, the feeling of peak experiences, of extreme highs. The alcoholic would try anything to recreate the experience akin to spiritual ecstasy, though these might be counterfeit spiritual experiences, physical substitutes. As their addiction deepened, “what they drank, how they drank it, the drugs they took with it, or how they used those drugs can all be understood as efforts to again experience the transcendence and power they once were granted in their relationship with alcohol. As the peaks became increasingly elusive, the ability to use alcohol to hide from personal experience served as some consolation” (Gregoire 350).

This understanding of alcoholism as the search for personal meaning, sheds light on some of the motivations and behaviours of the alcoholic. For instance, in the denial of one's alcoholism the individual believes they are protecting a deep source of personal meaning. Anything that serves to come between the alcoholic and the alcoholic relationship is considered a threat to what is considered their most important relationship, as this relationship defines the individual. Paradoxically, throughout the alcoholic relationship, the individual rather than reclaiming personal meaning, continues to lose more and more of themselves. This loss of identity to the alcoholic state reinforces their sense of worthlessness. Many individuals today feel that they no longer measure up, that they can no longer maintain appearances. They have come to believe that culturally and socially they are “less than” others in their society. These feelings of inferiority, of low self-worth, are often temporarily assuaged through substance use. It has been proposed that these feelings of anxiety and angst, this sense of spiritual malaise, this groundlessness, are also seen in the broader scope of society at

large in its overuse of mood altering substances (Minnick 28).

Upon arrival at the doors of AA, a new culture was encountered. Inside were groups of like-minded individuals who were attempting to bring order and a new sense of meaning to their lives (Minnick 45). These same individuals who indicated a sense of belonging and being among others who understood the specifics of their experiences are important elements of connection. For those who have felt alienated, alone and isolated, to be in the midst of others with whom they can identify is particularly helpful. Most alcoholics have, in addition to a spiritual void in their lives, an emotional void as well. Attending meetings with individuals who “have been there” fills that emotional void present in their lives. They build interdependence and intimacy, understanding and acceptance, all playing roles in returning the alcoholic to a stable footing (Minnick 57). Thus, belonging to an AA group provides members with a sense of community based on a commonly held set of values that has been lacking in life, building or rebuilding meaning and purpose in the individual.

Swora describes the alcoholic as one who has accumulated a storehouse full of frightening, painful, and shameful memories. The alcoholic is likely to enter sobriety with a history of drinking defined by horrible acts of both commission and omission, of guilt, loss, and regrets, life events for which the individual may feel deep shame (Swora 64). As the AA Big Book says “coming to his senses, [he] is revolted at certain episodes he vaguely remembers. These memories are a nightmare” (Alcoholics 73). In order to begin the process of recovery one must “imagine first that the present is past and, second, that the past may yet be changed and amended,” (Frankl *Man's* 109). In this way, our negative past is not fixed, but may be reinterpreted in order to give it meaning

within a larger context. This is often done in the AA program through the sharing of the stories of the past, through the shedding of light on situations that may have, at one time, been shame-based, and can now be used as a guidance tool for the newcomer. The shame is thereby removed and the past is amended and changed. All things that have happened have meaning and a purpose. This is not to say that negative aspects of the past suddenly become positive in and of themselves. However, as the "dark past" is worked into an new narrative of recovery and sobriety, it is granted positive value (Swora 67). The AA Big Book communicates this same message through the "promises." They state that the alcoholic "will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it" and "no matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience will benefit others" (*Alcoholics* 83-84).

The AA culture is an oral tradition. It communicates through the stories and slogans of its members. The written materials of AA rely largely on the life-stories of its membership to communicate valuable messages. Stories are put forth as quests, because the alcoholic path is most easily identified as a quest for change. AA recognizes the alcoholic experience as a "journey in search of oneself" (Gregoire 351). The narrative element, the "sharing, story telling" portion of AA, plays an extremely valuable role in the organization. Narrative is a compelling form of communication. It allows the listener to take from what is being said and apply it in a personal context. Narrative allows one to situate individuals within their own culture, without stripping context and meaning from what has been shared. In the AA narrative, both the teller and the recipient share in the creation of meaning. It is through the telling and retelling of stories of addiction and recovery that one can find personal meaning in one's own

story and also in the stories and experiences of others. Narrative reinforces the sense of community, by allowing all individuals attending the meeting to identify with others, and thereby reducing a sense of personal alienation, strengthening the bonds of group membership. It reinforces the joys of recovery while keeping the memories of addiction alive, but at arms length. The community of AA, inclusive and encouraging as it is of those whom society has cast out, provides a refuge from both evil, and also from a society in which the alcoholic feels not a shred of belonging. These bridges of belonging in the community of AA are created through the shared telling of one's past.

In the culture of the 21st century, addiction is rife. The numbers of those who struggle continues to rise, and many people turn to drugs and alcohol, and other substances and processes, to find meaning. They attempt to fill the pain and emptiness they feel and because these activities do not quash this pain and emptiness, chronic overindulgence, what is referred to as addiction, is the result (Minnick 126). The AA program is one of people expert in this subject. They approach addiction and recovery from personal experience and understand the pain and loss that often leads to abuse. Individuals who are members of AA speak a language that many searchers resonate with, and they recognize their own compulsive behaviours as a misdirected search for wholeness (Minnick 127).

A segment of the population continues to reorient themselves against the cultural norms, and begin the process of redefining what it means in this society to be a person of value and worth. Self-help groups, spiritual awakenings, and moral reconstruction programs seem to be gaining in popularity. AA membership continues to grow and its members focus on alcoholism, because it was through the portal of alcohol

that they “became aware of their emptiness and attentive to their spiritual malaise” (Minnick 144). In this search for wholeness, the program of AA recognized the importance of encouraging alcoholics to participate in mutual support and group work. The founders of AA believed that alcoholics must work with other alcoholics in order to recover (Gregoire 352). It is in connection with others that an individual is able to transcend the self-seeking and self-centred relationships they had developed with alcohol and others. Participation at a group level takes the onus off oneself and puts it onto the society of AA, particularly so for the newcomer, who is the most important person in the fellowship of AA. Finding healthy ways of making contact with others in recovery helps to alleviate the feelings of isolation and helps to encourage the development of cultural belonging in one's life. There is a personal recognition that emerges over time when participating in the AA program, that having experienced a painful outcome that could not be changed, not only must there be radical acceptance of these negative experiences, they must also be turned into a new, meaningful experience, into an achievement (Frankl *Will* 72)

Recovery is more than just not drinking. Recovery is a holistic and deeply personal experience, as the the relationship that the alcoholic maintains with alcohol is deeply embedded in the core of one's being. The success of AA came about because the founders understood what it meant to be an alcoholic. They understood the importance of alcoholics connecting with other alcoholics, and they saw the potential in individuals healing themselves (Gregoire 356). The power to have effectual recovery from the ravages of alcoholism occurs when individuals learn to separate themselves from their relationship with alcohol and begin to give their lives a new sense of purpose and

meaning.

Forgiveness plays a vital role in recovery. In the Twelve Step Programs that claim that addiction is fueled by held grievances, “resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else” (*Alcoholics* 64), but also in recovery that requires that amendments be made and forgiveness be requested for the harms that have been done in active addiction. The inability to forgive others, and thereby an inability to release prior resentments, is considered a very real obstacle to recovery. While forgiveness is vital it is also an extremely difficult part of recovery. In order to escape looking at one's own faults, individuals focus with great resentment on the faults of another. This becomes the perfect excuse to overlook one's own behaviours and never address them (*AA Alcoholics* 78). The character defects that lead us to the inability to forgive are often driven by pride and self-centredness. According to Augustine, pride is the root of our troubles. According to AA, it is the defects of the self, self-delusion, self-centredness, self-pity, self-seeking, all of which grow out of pride. In this way we offend others, and they retaliate. Sometimes it seems individuals hurt us without provocation, but when we look closely we see that such hurt was inevitable. It was based on certain decisions we made, oriented toward ourselves. “The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn’t think so” (*AA Alcoholics* 62). Pride and an inability to forgive others, and ourselves, come together to hinder our recovery.

The focus of the AA program is to bring the still suffering addict to the point of spiritual awakening, either spontaneously, as in an instantaneous conversion experience, or slowly as a result of working the Twelve Steps, with the result being a

changed life. According to Lyons et al, constructs such as forgiveness, life meaning, existential well-being, and a sense of universal connection, are all incorporated into the role of spirituality when one is being treated for substance misuse (Lyons *Forgiveness* 531). These elements have long been recognized by the program of AA as being vital components of a successful recovery plan. AA stresses the element of spirituality as a life changing, worldview changing, integral component of their program. In response to the fear that the addict feels when making such dramatic changes, religion can be the spiritual anchor that provides an individual with a feeling of security like one can find nowhere else (Frankl *Will* 144), and that same religious faith and the search for personal meaning are intimately related. In this way, the influence of spiritual practice and religious doctrine may shape purpose and meaning for a recovering addict by altering the individual's values and beliefs (Lyons *Forgiveness* 536). Some would say that personal faith grows out of a spiritual rebirth and they, together, are vital for recovery (Minnick 29).

Entering recovery through the door of spirituality or religious doctrine includes the process of looking back on one's life and making meaning from it. We see in the AA Big Book numerous examples of individuals who were able to make meaning from their lives. We also find narrative of changed morals and values, indicating a new basis of both self-valuation and interaction with the world at large. The recognition of themselves and others as individuals of worth, as individuals of value, begins to come to the fore. The realization that the past was not some obscure, anonymous action, but it was alive and hurtful, both to themselves and others, becomes clear. Working post-spiritual awakening to create a life of meaning and purpose meant addressing issues

about the hurts and wrongs perpetrated against real people from one's past. It meant working actively toward a new life of peaceful sobriety.

The changes that occur in our actions and behaviours are reflections of what is taking place in the depths of one's own being. There is a learning that is going on, to “trust” at an instinctual level, at a faith level. “We do not catch hold of [ultimate meaning] on intellectual grounds but on existential grounds, out of our whole being, i.e., through faith. But it is my contention that faith in the ultimate meaning is preceded by trust in an ultimate being, by trust in God” (Frankl *Will* 145) This same message is reflected in the AA text, where we “sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out” (*Alcoholics* 96) The working of this step helps to solidify the spiritual awakening that the individual has undergone. This culminates in the individual being stronger, more aware, more grateful, and a fuller participant in the community of AA. The individual is finding a renewed purpose in life and is making meaning in life that was not known prior to the spiritual awakening.

In the process of establishing personal relationships with a “God *as we understood Him,*” (italics in original) each recovering addict moves toward an incredibly personalized religion, so that every individual will find the words of their own to address the ultimate being (Frankl *Will* 154). The culture and structure of AA brings the recovering alcoholic to a life that takes on new meaning, including spiritual and moral values and a new identity as a part of her recovery.

Chapter 9

Healing, A Gift to be Worked

Having established the background of AA through an exploration of the program as it was founded, looking at the writing of Paul and Augustine, at what constituted a spiritual awakening in AA, and how individuals were able to find and create new life meaning and purpose within the community of AA, it is now important to examine the concepts of healing and grace as they are lived and presented through the AA program. The program of AA operates and sends its message out into the world in such a way that it has become one of our modern methods of manifesting grace and healing in the world today. For over eighty years AA has been bringing new hope and new life to individuals who felt their lives were hopeless. These same individuals then shared what had been freely shared with them, with other struggling alcoholics, and the program became self-perpetuating. In their willingness to help others, they were also helping themselves.

The healing found in AA is comprised of grace. The concept of grace is not strictly a Christian one. In all religions there is a concept similar to the idea of grace. Judaism and Torah are filled with calls for God's loving salvation. Islam looks to Allah for his mercy. For Hindus and Buddhists, though they emphasize personal practice, liberation comes through the grace of the Divine. Prayers and hymns make direct mention of grace and its liberation. Tibetan Buddhists request that the Divine impart compassionate grace upon individuals. Poems make mention of overcoming difficulties

by grace. It matters not where one comes from or what religion one follows, for all adherents, all individuals are created for freedom and love and our compulsions hinder us, leaving us desperate for grace in order to receive salvation (May 16-17).

For Christians, grace is understood to be the loving gift of God's nature that flows into, and through, His creation in an infinite river of illumination, love, healing, and reconciliation. As it is a gift, individuals are free to accept it, reject it, ignore it, ask for it, or pass it on. It is often given regardless of our errors or intentions, but once received one's response is awe and gratitude (May 17). The program of AA also recognizes the power of grace at work in its membership. Wilson, co-founder of AA, experienced grace immediately following his conversion experience when he described "the moment I fully accepted [it], the effect was electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by a such a peace and serenity as I had never known" (AA *Alcoholics* 14). He then went on to realize that faith without works was dead, and in order to survive and grow in his recovery, he must strive to magnify his spiritual life through self-sacrifice for others, and work. If he did not, he would not survive the trials and tribulations that were sure to come his way in the days and years to come (AA *Alcoholics* 15). In the first days of AA, the recognition of grace as a gift of peace and serenity, and the realization that alcoholics must work with other alcoholics, both for their own sobriety and for others', came to be understood.

Recognizing the realm of addiction to also be that of sickness, individuals were dependent upon grace for freedom from addiction, and for healing from that sickness, both morally and physically. Individuals were also dependent upon community. They

had fallen into their previous communities centred around alcohol and drugs, in an effort to belong. The replacement of that community with “an alternative community that provides them with more belonging, being wanted, and purpose” (Maté 308) was required in order that successful recovery from addiction be possible. Recovery was then founded upon a shared combination of grace and supportive, healthy, and moral community. This is what was provided in the new community of AA, an understanding, supportive, moral, and grace-filled organization of individuals who had come together in order to provide each other with communal support as they worked through the issues associated with alcoholism.

Individuals in addiction had so easily responded to desire and attachment in the past, leaving themselves broken and stained and in need of the love of God to restore relationship with themselves and community. They were not strong enough to break free by their own determination. This was not about will power, it was about surrendering to the grace of God. In the program of AA, this takes place in the third step, where one agrees to turn one's will and one's life over to the care of God as one understands God. This is a vital step, for it reinforces the process of spiritual transformation and it opens the heart to God. It also places the individual firmly within the community of other AA members who have also taken this commitment step. This is a process of willingness and faith, both of which are vital in the long-term spiritual health of the individual.

As a part of this healing, individuals must stop defending themselves and begin confessing what had been taking place. This takes great humility. Pride, the greatest

obstacle to recovery, stands in the way. Self-justification for past mistakes must be addressed. “You first healed me from the desire to justify myself, so that you might then have mercy on my other iniquities” (*Conf. X.xxxvi.58*). In order to restore healing to the sick, treatment is required, comprised, in part, by confession. The depths of sickness must be conveyed, the darkness must be exposed, in order that new light might replace that dark corner where deep-seated obsessions lurk. This method of confessing was not meant to be harsh, it was meant to prevent the patient from returning to sickness, from relapsing, and thus confession was encouraged with the utmost compassion. When one was able to participate in confession, then one had accepted one's addiction. This kind of acceptance was only born out of a rigorous honesty. Confession was not a superficial exercise. It was important to get to the heart of the matter, to the depths of that which had caused the sickness, in order that it not recur.

Acceptance of one's condition, and its necessary requisite, humility, were key among virtues espoused by Christians, such humility being the founding mark of the community of Christ. It was known as one of the quiet virtues as found in Gal 5:22 along with kindness, compassion, peacefulness, gentleness, and forgiveness. The foundation of humility was an overwhelming understanding of the truth about ones' relationship to God. Individuals are inclined to ignore their vices in order to concentrate on their virtues. However in humility they are forced to acknowledge the weakness and ignorance that had led them to sin, and to praise God from whom came all moral goodness. This emphasis on humility was certainly not the normative way of being in contemporary society. Such humility, based on a true valuation of self, goes

counter to the competitive and aggressive behaviours experienced in this current society. However, in AA, the virtue of humility was highly desirable, and pride was recognized as being the downfall of many alcoholics.

In the program of AA, the character defect of pride, so often came with the recovery seeking addict through the doors of AA, only slowly to be replaced by the necessary humility as one worked the program. The Big Book of AA stated that though “none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation” (AA *Alcoholics* 25), this was what was required. The leveling of pride came about through the concept of “admitted.” In Steps One, Five, and Ten admissions were made that continued to further develop one's humility and level one's pride. Initially one was required to admit one's powerlessness over alcohol; then to admit to oneself, another human being and God the exact nature of one's wrongs; and finally to admit on a daily basis when one was wrong and then make immediate amends. As the self-denial accompanied by pride begins to slip away, the allowing into one's consciousness the self-acceptance of one's true nature begins to take a foothold. The admissions that have been made allow the true person, different from the persons who came through the doors at their first meeting, to gradually reveal themselves. As the old person falls away, the humility matures and the life-saving ideas of AA take root in the individual and grow.

The message of AA is one that states that all who follow the Twelve Steps will be transformed from within. This message is one of a vivid life change for those who suffer from addiction. The post-spiritual awakening individuals enter into an unlearning

phase, where one's old ways are liberated, cleansed, and redeemed. This work is not done by oneself, it is God's work. It is grace. And so individuals go forth into the spiritual realm where they pray and listen to the spirit that communicates within. They begin to live a spiritual reality to the best of their ability (Nouwen *Wounded* 90). As individuals develop their refocused lives further, they find that they have fundamentally changed, desiring more and more to live a life of love and compassion. Their inner conversion has led to lives that are outwardly virtuous. The word compassion means "to suffer with. To be compassionate, therefore, means first of all to confess our part in the suffering human condition and to recognize that the anchor points of our identity are in the common experience of a broken existence" (Nouwen *Comp.* 14). Individuals begin to share their lives of transformation with others who are still trapped, knowing that there is no state and no power that holds them captive, that God's grace cannot enter with love. God breaks the powerful hold of evil that has held them bound. This may be what had occurred in the most miraculous recoveries from addiction. The gift of grace had reached in and accomplished what no individual could ever do, provided an opportunity for genuine surrender (May 118).

The original weakness, the habit, the vice, leaves a permanent scar that remains vulnerable. "From the Latin word *vulnerable*, "to wound," vulnerability is our susceptibility to be wounded. This fragility is part of our nature and cannot be escaped. The best the brain can do is to shut down conscious awareness of it when pain becomes so vast or unbearable that it threatens to overwhelm our capacity to function" (Maté 38). This vulnerability leaves its trace as concupiscence, and, according to Augustine, it

always remains. And so, though much progress has been made under grace, there is always more work that needs to be done. The addict may be able to live without the constant obsession, something that would have seemed impossible, yet the reprieve is conditional, based upon a daily strengthening of one's spiritual condition. Unlike education, that is cumulative and progressive, the recovery process is one that nevertheless leaves the patient vulnerable to relapse and other diseases. Even when they are headed in the generally right direction, they are liable to stumble (Atkins 361). And so, the journey continues with a new foundation built by the newly recovering alcoholic who finds himself in a new dialogue with a personal God, one who becomes involved in the minutia of daily life. This dialogue, or prayer, is an important component, strengthening one's relationship with the God of one's understanding. Spiritual fitness is recognized as the most important criterion for long-term sobriety, thus, in Step Eleven the individual is reminded to make prayer and meditation a part of a daily routine, as a conscious contact with the God of one's understanding is required to keep one spiritually fit (Nouwen *Wounded* 17).

The transformed individual is recognized as a part of the larger whole. The community that surrounds the individual identifies with the individual and also acknowledges others just beyond the perimeter of their community who still suffer deeply in sin or addiction. These too are in need of healing. Other recovering alcoholics can be the compassionate instruments of a Higher Power, bringing individuals to, and encouraging them in, faith. It becomes natural for individuals to be concerned for those around them who are sick. In this way spiritual healing grows into a communal

responsibility, one where our compassion is manifested in solidarity. “It is the profoundly felt experience of human sameness” (Nouwen *Comp.* 13). This solidarity is difficult to find in a society where difference is prized above all else. Helping individuals to see their sameness in their sickness, and to share in that sameness in order to find healing, both for themselves and others, has been a part of the AA program from the beginning. One alcoholic helping another alcoholic.

The spiritual healing that was communally provided was an example of miraculous grace. This was an unmistakable intervention by the hand of God, or Higher Power, whose impact on the individual had been one where both the physical body had been changed and also the spiritual nature of the individual had been redirected toward wholeness. This spiritual transformation empowered people to modify their addictive behaviours (May 153). The program of AA welcomed newcomers into its meetings in order that those who were ill would be led to healing, even if they did not yet recognize it. They were taken into community, and gently surrounded by the grace of its membership. As had been previously said, grace is a gift. It is one that must be asked for, but it is also one for which there will always be gratitude for having received. Gratitude and humility thus become reflections of the community of AA. As individuals accept personal grace into their lives through a God of their understanding, it is as great a miracle as the way that grace abounds in the AA community (May 124).

The early leadership of AA's own active and continuing recovery, was not in isolation, it was also incorporated in the overall healing of its wider membership. Wilson and Smith recognized that their personal recovery needs were being met by the

needs of other alcoholics (Nouwen *Wounded* 72). They did not attempt to present themselves as healed, no longer in need of assistance. The program, as they saw it, was a continuum, recovery was a gift received on a daily basis. They understood that they were like all other members of AA, “broken in search of healing [...] sinners in need of grace” (Nouwen *Comp.* 17). As members began to heal, they became as ministers, teachers, doctors, leaders, to those that were newly coming into the fellowship of AA looking for recovery.

These varying characteristics of healing and grace are not only to be found within the Christian Church. What is “true and holy” can surely be found in that which is non-Christian. If this is so, then the action of grace may be present in the hearts of any individual of good character, honesty, goodwill, gratitude, and humility. Grace might be ascertained anywhere that these characteristics reflect the life of Christ into the world, and present in any community that tries to inspire its members to practice these virtues and carry them to the larger world. This way of living, receiving and giving grace, is one that helps to rebuild individuals spiritual and moral natures in order that they may have lives of peace and liberation. Through the recognition of a God of one's understanding, a conversion experience, dynamic moral inventory, confession and humility, gratitude, daily surrender, transformative community, and ultimately the inclusion of both newcomers and wayward soul-sick members, the program of AA has helped countless individuals strive toward healing and grace. The application of the AA programs' Twelve Steps continue to bring individuals to a conversion experience. The element of conversion may be dramatic, or it may be painfully mundane. Whichever

path it takes, the lives that have been changed through a transformative experience are never the same again. Sinners have become pious, believers have been made from idolaters, drunkards have been made sober, thieves have been converted to honesty, liars have become truth-tellers, and as many lives as there are, so many stories of change there may be. In the changing of hearts through the program of AA, lives the gift of healing and grace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when AA was created, it presented a radical break from traditional perceptions of how to deal with alcohol misuse. It retreated from the standard view of the day that was that alcoholics suffered from a moral impediment to their characters, and posited the revolutionary concepts that no one understands an alcoholic like another alcoholic, and that alcoholism was a disease, a spiritual malady, where the only source for long-term healing was to turn one's life over to a God of one's own understanding. The foundational blocks of the program of AA became alcoholics helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety, and a “belief in and dependence upon God” (AA *Alcoholics* xvi).

These two characteristics came to define AA. It grew to develop and expand both the sources of knowledge for the program and also the current content of a properly implemented program. AA took the lost and disenfranchised alcoholics and brought them back into a transformative community that ultimately included both newcomers, oldtimers, and wayward soul-sick members, all welcome in the rooms of AA. This community replaced the lives of isolation and despair experienced in active alcoholism with lives of connectedness, richness, and value.

Participating in AA meant that individuals who were divided within themselves between the competing desires for good and bad, between excessive appetites, were able to find personal reunification, as if the spirit and the body had finally come together in their, now, common desires. The program of AA provided individuals with a

type of grace, granted to them through a “Higher Power”, that freed them from the broad experience that captivity of the divided self constitutes. Similarly, we see in Paul's writing regarding Romans 7:13-25 and its various interpretations, the flesh versus the spirit dichotomy, and in Augustine's *Confessions*, entry points into an understanding of the struggles of the addicted soul, as well as in a more generalized sense, that all people participate in and struggle with divisions of the will, as they are attributes of our own experience with ourselves.

Through the implementation of the Twelve Steps of AA, the process created by AA to deal with the harm caused by alcoholism to both the individual and to society at large, alcoholics were learning to fully live again. Each individual was surrendering to a power greater than themselves on a daily basis, and participating in both a dynamic moral inventory and personal confession. They were making amends to those they had harmed while in a state of alcoholism. They were learning to move through their lives experiencing gratitude and humility. These newly learned behaviours were leading people to encounter spiritual awakenings and conversion experiences that changed their lives to the very core.

In the rooms of AA, individuals were able to explore their past and, through the use of stories and shared experiences, create new positive meanings from what had been negative, hurtful, and isolating. Individuals built trust in the process through the hearing of stories of those who have been in similar circumstances. Viktor Frankl equated addiction and its self-imprisonment as a sort of existential crisis. He found that as individuals push through their personal suffering they achieved new meaning in their lives, and that the reinterpretation of the past to bring meaning to the future is a

powerful healing tool for recovery (Frankl *Man's* 109). The program of AA makes use of these principles at each and every meeting, allowing and encouraging struggling alcoholics in their midst to rewrite their past by giving their experiences new value.

The program of AA has continued to operate and send its message of healing out into the world over the past 80 years. It has done so in a non-judgemental, inclusive, and successful way. It has made use of Christian principles in a non-proselytizing fashion and has brought both moral and spiritual healing to vast numbers of sick and suffering alcoholics. According to Augustine, this sickness lies in the soul, and healing lies in spiritual reunification. A sick soul affects all parts of the human body. According to AA, spiritual healing is one of the major steps on the long road of recovery. The program of AA, designed as it was for alcoholics, does shed a light on how others who struggle with compulsions and obsessive desires may be able to find ways and means to both bring them under control and return the individual to a state of wholeness.

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